

BACCANO!

バッカーノ!

1935-D
Luckstreet Boys

成田 良悟
Ryohgo Narita

電撃文庫

1935-D Luckstreet Boys: Front Matter

Everything that shows up before the story gets going

Notes:

1. The images in this post were graciously provided by [michinyong](#). Thank you!!
2. Chapter titles are particularly subject to change if they get namedropped in the chapters themselves.

BACCANO!

バッカーノ!

1935-D

Luckstreet Boys

10



成田良悟

Ryohgo Narita

電撃文庫

5





BACCANO!

バッカーノ!
1933-D
Lockstreet Boys

成田 良悟
Ryohgo Narita

イラスト&エナミカツミ
Illustration: katsuemi

P13　闇　　章　精神整理に余念がない

P19　二十三章　悪魔は約束を忘れない

P33　二十四章　醉かな體など似合わない

P69　二十五章　小悪党には無い

P89　二十六章　大人しくしているわけがない

P129　二十七章　邪魔が入らぬわけがない

P155　二十八章　もはや言葉も通じない

P195　二十九章　やむを得ない

P250　接続　章　何があるとしか思えない

P273　接続章裏　我々に明日はない



Interlude: There's No Time for Anything But Organizing What They Know

Chapter 23: The Demon Does Not Forget His Promise

Chapter 24: The Morning Should Not Be This Quiet

Chapter 25: The Rogue Can't Do Anything

Chapter 26: There's No Way They'll Just Behave Themselves

Chapter 27: There's No Way No One Will Interfere

Chapter 28: Words Won't Get Through Anymore

Chapter 29: There's Nothing To Be Done

Connecting Chapter: There Has To Be Something There

Connecting Chapter: We Have No Tomorrow



ついに始まるカジノパーティー。ギャンブルに勝つのは、誰だー！？

The casino party finally begins. Who will win this gamble—?!

エルマーのアルバートロス曰く

「ヒューストヘニーメート君は、自ら想てるところがいい」

「ああ、ほんとうに話しゃないよ。でも表面的の話づくい童連では全うできるかな」

「二人の人間性の扱つとは、多分正確者なんといひ。だけだ、結論をつける事の早いのがうつていう意味で、英國士官はほんまんだよな」「ハーバード・オールド・スクールで教習受ける」「春の本場の結婚式みたいなの多いつの間にあわつたって、早いよな、まあ、ふふ満ち満ちいるのねばそれが一番だよ」

【春の本場】(2)

「人は老け口があくまであるけど、違う口はもやもやもある」

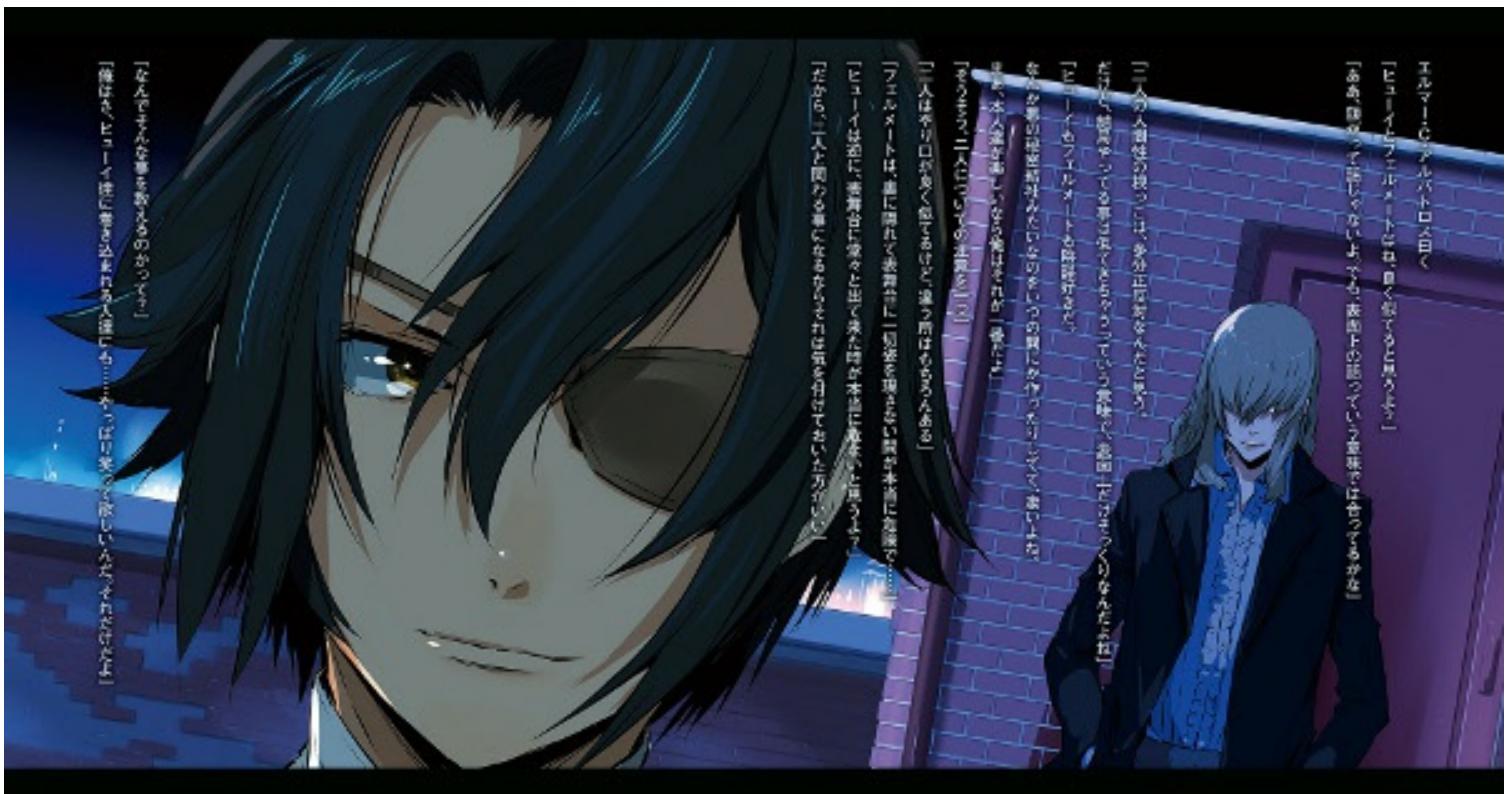
【エルマー】は、重に腰れて妻齊美に一句歌を贈らない聲を本当に知るが……

「ヒューストは近づいて妻齊美と並んで床邊に立つと嘆くも？」

「だから、人と聞かる事になるならそれは歌を有けておいた方がいい」

「なんでもんな事を教えるのかつて？」

「俺はかくヒュースト君が教込まれる人達にも……やっぱり笑って欲しいんだ。それだけだよ」



According to Elmer C. Albatross:

"I think Huey and Fermet are pretty similar!"

"Not their faces, I mean, but it is on a superficial level."

"The roots of their personalities are polar opposites, I think.

But their actions wind up so similar that they're basically identical on the surface."

"Huey and Fermet both love scheming.

What with like, creating these evil secret societies in the blink of an eye... it's pretty impressive, right?

Well, as long as they're having fun, that's all I care about."

"Oh, right, I wanted to warn you about one thing about them."

"Their actions are pretty similar, but there are some ways they differ."

"Fermet is at his most dangerous when he hides in the shadows and never takes center stage..."

"But Huey, on the other hand, is really dangerous when he decides to take center stage with aplomb."

"So if you're going to get involved with them, you should be careful of that."

"Why am I telling you this?"

"Well, you know. I want to make sure the people who get wrapped up with Huey and Fermet can smile, too."



CHARACTERS

Melvi Dormentaire: The main dealer employed by the Runorata Family for the casino party. Seeks Szilard's knowledge because of something in his past. Kidnapped Ennis to provoke Firo.

Firo Prochainezo: A young capo of the Martillo Family, responsible for their casino. Because of Ennis, he angrily rises to Melvi's challenge.

Vino: Real name: Claire Stanfield. A capricious man who sometimes acts as an assassin, he's currently serving as Melvi's bodyguard.

Luck Gandor: The youngest of the three Gandor brothers. He's employed a handful of assassins in order to figure out who the Gandors' enemies are.

Ladd Russo: A relative of the Russo Family don. A homicidal lunatic with a number of screws loose. In the employ of the Gandors, but hoping for a chance to cut loose at the casino party, and especially to kill Claire.

Huey Laforet: An Immortal, and Chané and Liza's father. Watching the casino party from elsewhere as a guest of the Runoratas. Firo gouged out one of his eyes.

Bartolo Runorata: Don of one of the prominent east coast mafia families, the Runoratas, with ties to Nebula and Senator Beriam as well. He organized this casino party, but his true aim is a mystery.

Manfred Beriam: A US Senator. He's taken Spike, a former member of the Lemures, as a bodyguard. He's promoting the gun training that Spike offers to Sonja, who arrived with his maids, Pamela and Lana, so he must be up to something...

Nader Schasschule: Connected to the *Flying Pussyfoot* incident. His betrayal of the Lemures failed, but he miraculously survived the subsequent attempt on his life. Participating in the casino party as Eve Genoard's stand-in.

Jacuzzi Splot: A leader with a sword tattoo on his face, but a coward and a

crybaby. Boyfriend of Nice. He's helping out at the casino party, but...

Isaac Dian & Miria Harvent: Same as always. Also helping out at the casino party.

Ennis: A homunculus created by Szilard. Other than being immortal herself, she is not significantly different from a human. Having been kidnapped by Melvi, she is locked up in a room on a ship somewhere.

Victor Talbot: An Immortal. The vice president of the department of the Bureau of Investigation that handles the Immortals. There are so many Immortals wrapped up in this one that he, too, seems to be getting involved...

Ronny Schiatto: A Martillo Family capo. A demon. Kept away from this incident by personal business.

Fred: A doctor (often called a "gray magician") who saved Nader after the *Flying Pussyfoot* incident. Who, a friend of Ladd's, is his assistant.

Chané Laforet: An expert knife-wielder. Claire's girlfriend, who gave up her voice. She is Huey's daughter, and she and her younger sister Liza are absolutely loyal to their father. At the casino party, she is keeping an eye on anyone who might interrupt Huey.

Graham Specter: Ladd treats him as a younger brother, and he loves to dismantle things. His underling, Shaft, plays his straight man. Knows Jacuzzi and Chané as well, apparently. Exploring the area around the casino party with Ladd.

Eve Genoard: wants to participate in the casino party to look for her older brother, Dallas, but since she has no experience, she's employing Nader as her stand-in.

Czeslaw Meyer: An Immortal boy. Not good with Claire. A little more black-hearted than his appearance might imply, but surprisingly inclined to go along with things despite that. Saved Nader by chance.

Pamela: Has a past in robbing casinos, and was trying her hand at that again, even in front of the mafia, but Nader figured her out. What will come of her meeting with Nader, who used to know her friend Sonja...?

Renée Palamedes Branvillier: An executive of Nebula. She seems a bit slow, and in fact is a bit slow. Chané and Liza's mother.

Christopher Shouldered: One of Huey's homunculi. With his red eyes and shark-like teeth, he looks a bit like a vampire. A friend of Placido Russo's grandchild Ricardo.

The Lamia: An organization working for Huey. In New York to guard Huey. There's "The Poet," who speaks oddly; the beautiful Sickle who uses an incredible, capoeira-like kicking technique; Rail, a bomber with a scarred face; Frank, an enormous child; the clawed Hong Chi Mei; Sham and Hilton, in charge of intelligence and communication; and others.

1935-D Luckstreet Boys, Interlude: There's No Time For Anything But Organizing What They Know

The Daily Days reviews what they know about the Ra's Lance incident.

"All right. Shall we start by organizing what we know?"

In response to the voice that emerged from behind the mountain of documents, the employees of the Daily Days newspaper braced themselves and nodded.

"Then I'll start by explaining the initiating incident. The Martillo Family's young executive, Firo Prochainezo. A few months ago, he infiltrated Alcatraz as part of a plea bargain, and had contact with the terrorist Huey Laforet at that time. Around the same time, Huey disappeared from prison."

"So you think Firo had something to do with his escape?"

"No, it's more likely that he had his own organization help with the escape. But we've received information that Huey is planning something here in New York. It sounds like he's being sheltered on land belonging to the Runorata Family, as their guest."

"And as a result, the terrorists he controls have converged on New York en masse. You've got those seaplanes, you've got those circus-looking folks wandering around... What a mess."

As Nicholas, a veteran of these matters, made his report, the man in Chinese clothing—Elean—interjected his own thoughts.

After hearing their conversation, the president spoke up from behind the mountain of documents.

"If we were just looking at a three-way standoff between Huey, the Bureau of Investigation, and the mafia, it would be one thing. But now the House Dormentaire, a financial conglomerate from Europe, has gotten involved. So this is well into 'top secret' territory. We won't be putting this in the paper."

At the Daily Days, "top secret" referred to information about matters removed from the common sense of the world. Things like vampires and fairies, which could have come straight out of a fantasy novel, were included in this domain, but here in New York, the information they received most often concerned "the liquor of immortality" and those who had, by drinking it, become beings known as "Immortals."

Compared to that, the top dogs at the Daily Days had decided that information on politicians and Mafiosi, or even hypothetically scandals concerning the President, counted as "ordinary information."

The reason they were conducting this extra meeting, too, was surely because of the top-secret connection.

"But who would have thought that all of those critical players would gather at the illegal casino party going down at that Ra's Lance skyscraper? That said, there certainly seem to be more people from the ordinary underworld involved in this than Immortals, don't you think? If you leave out the hundreds affected by Nebula's experiments."

The next man to offer his information was a man with glasses and distinctively hollow cheeks: Henry.

"There are five main powers. A mish-mash composed of the gang calling themselves 'Camorra,' the Martillo Family, a group of delinquents working for them, and members of the Russo Family; the Runoratas, a mafia family prominent on the east coast; the Gandor Family and a handful of hitmen they've hired; the Immortal Huey Laforet and the terrorist groups he leads; and the allegedly fallen Dormentaire conglomerate, stretching their hand out from Europe. ...Though it seems like there are a handful of others—the BOI, Senator Beriam, a Nebula employee or two—skulking around in the shadows as well."

In response to the man with a shock of white hair at his temple, Rachel, who had been silent until then, took up one of the documents and opened her

mouth. “So what about this ‘Nader Schasscule’ whose name keeps cropping up? It doesn’t look like he’s connected to any of these organizations... And I haven’t heard his name in New York before this.”

Henry adjusted his glasses with a sarcastic smile.

“Well, now, he’s not completely unrelated to *you*, you know. He’s connected to the *Flying Pussyfoot* incident. ...So, if we had to attach him to one of the four main forces here, I suppose he would count as ‘formerly on Huey’s side.’”

“.....? I don’t remember there being anyone by that name aboard?”

“That’s correct; he didn’t board the train. He couldn’t. After trying to betray the black suits—the Lemures—he failed and was nearly killed. Really, it’s because he survived that catastrophe that the police have a decent amount of information on the Lemures.”

“That’s right, I do remember hearing that... But what’s he got to do with this case? Apparently he’s participating in the casino party as Eve Genoard’s stand-in?”

Rachel’s brow furrowed, and Henry shook his head slightly.

“That, I don’t know... Nader Schasscule... As far as we’ve been able to investigate, frankly, he doesn’t really matter. He obviously just doesn’t have the same weight to throw around that Firo or Bartolo or Huey does. He is the least likely, least effective actor in this little incident. If anything, he’s gotten involved by mistake, or is someone’s pawn—something like that.”

He hadn’t taken Nader so lightly to begin with, but no matter how closely they investigated him, they hadn’t found any kind of mysterious backer or sign that he had supernatural powers like the Immortals.

But when Henry tried to continue on in that vein, the voice from behind the mountain of documents interrupted him.

“I wouldn’t be so sure of that.”

“Sir?”

“Oh, I don’t mean to say that he has any special connections or hidden backers or anything like that. But I would advise against taking anyone so

lightly.”

Though his words admonished his subordinates, the president’s voice had an amused ring to it as he continued.

“Regardless of how it happened, he’s part of this incident now. That in itself is a significant fact. Everyone, from someone at the heart of this matter like Huey to a tourist who happens to walk by the casino building, is overflowing with ‘worth’—that is to say, information.”

“That’s true...”

“You could even say that no one, even a hero or a lowlife, matters until the moment they take action. As long as they’re involved in an incident, those of us in the business of gathering information can’t afford to leave anyone alone. For example... who could have predicted before the fact that a couple of robbers who arrived in New York in 1930 would become so deeply entrenched in top-secret matters?”

After confirming that the rest of the room had fallen silent, the president spoke in a light, joking tone.

“One would have needed the ability to see the future to guess that. And if there were a perfect fortune teller like that in this city, that, too, would be a top-secret matter.”

Having said that much, the president paused for a moment, and then added as if talking to himself, “...Still, I have to wonder about the source of all this top-secret business... That demon... Where is he now, and what’s he up to?”

1935-D Luckstreet Boys, Chapter 23: The Demon Does Not Forget His Promise

They carried out that “ceremony” on the deck of a ship floating in the sea.

Though it could never compare to the *Olympia* class of ships, which included the *Titanic*, the steamship was over 100 meters in length and its presence cut boldly through the waves around it.

But the *thing* that appeared on the deck was far more uncanny than the giant steamship they were riding on, and it unleashed an eerie sense of pressure on all those aboard.

[I see... intriguing.]

The *thing* quietly spoke up, but the people on the deck—a group of men and women dressed in old robes that didn’t look like they belonged in the 1900s—couldn’t find who was speaking.

Without even taking form, it made their hearts tremble in fear.

It is said that people fear the unknown—that which cannot be put into words or theorized about—far more than anything they can explain.

Until the robed men and women actually heard that voice, they had thought that they had understood, to a certain extent, what they were dealing with. They thought they could put it into words. They even imagined it might be possible to control it.

But the moment they heard that *thing’s* voice echoing as if directly into their minds, they realized.

It came. It's here.

Fear.

We—we called it.

And regret.

They mourned their foolishness.

Led astray by money, the knowledge they'd been given, and the existence of "immortality," this group without any particularly deep understanding of alchemy or religious studies had summoned a **certain being**, and now they regretted it.

This sham of a sect, lacking a basis in or even any kind of respect for other faiths, had only just realized how absurd the being they'd just called for was.

A "demon."

They'd forced their own understanding of that commonplace word onto the situation and assumed they could handle this.

The second they realized their assumptions were flawed, *it* spoke of itself as if to mock them.

[What's wrong? The last alchemists who summoned me called me a 'demon'... So it seems that you've been told that I'm a demon, as well? What a hassle. Fine, just call me a 'demon.]

The eerie voice, emanating from god knew where, spoke one-sidedly to the sham worshippers gathered on the deck.

[Was it Melvi Dormentaire who came up with this plan? Or perhaps that scheming vixen from the House Dormentaire? ...Or maybe Rosetta... another 'demon' like me contacted you and gave you a hint? But on second thought, this is the kind of thing any snot-nosed kid could come up with, isn't it... Well, no matter.]

The being that had called itself a demon spoke in a voice that sounded both imposing and bored as it reverberated across the deck.

[Let's see, this is... I see, west of India. Isn't that impressive of you, to have

called me all the way out here from New York City. Well? What knowledge is it that you seek?]

In response to the direct question, one of the robed men finally managed to calm down enough to speak. With fear in his eyes, he asked, “A-are you really... the omniscient, omnipotent being that the House Dormentaire told us about?”

[I wouldn’t say I’m omniscient or omnipotent. But I will say that I am the being that the House Dormentaire told you about. Hm, so that was what you wanted to know... information about me. Well, I’ve told you what you wanted. Farewell.]

“Wh—?! W-wait!”

[I’m kidding. I wouldn’t act out a cheap joke like that. Actually, I have done so in the past, until I started to develop a reputation as an immature quibbler. But no matter.]

From the tone of its voice, it sounded like the “demon” might have shrugged there, but the robed figures couldn’t see it, and thus couldn’t confirm that.

“S-so you’ll tell us... whatever we want? F-first show yourself!”

[...I’m already aware that you have not summoned me here with this timing by coincidence, you know.]

“? Timing...? Wh-what do you mean?”

[...Hm, so apparently you haven’t heard the circumstances. Just the Dormentaires’ pawns, then? Well, no matter.]

With a disinterested air, the “demon” changed the subject and began acting out his real role—on the deck of a ship, just as he had in 1711.

[Well? What knowledge do you want from me? The previous alchemists who called me sought the knowledge of immortality. The ones before them, too. Others have asked me about the truth of the universe, how to make gold out of iron, whether God really exists. I will warn you in advance, whether you’ll be able to immediately implement whatever knowledge you receive is a different matter. To transform other elements into gold is beyond the current technological level, for instance.]

"W-wait, can't you just tell us all of that in order?"

[You're a greedy one. But there would be no end to it. According to the contract involved in my summoning, I am to tell you one thing, and maybe some incidental information connected to it. For example, if you wanted to know about immortality, I'd tell you how to brew the special liquor that would make you so.]

"...We want to talk it over before we decide. Could you wait? No one told us we'd only be learning one thing."

[...]

Despite their earlier fear of the "demon," the robed figures must have thought that the ritual they'd used to summon it had placed it completely under their control, because they were slowly calming down and began scheming together what they should do next.

Watching their greed-filled faces from somewhere on the ship, the "demon" spoke across the deck with a sigh in his voice.

[Honestly... For personal reasons, I'd thought that I'd make a shocking entrance next time I was summoned so that people would remember my face. But I don't think I particularly want all of you knowing what I look like. You'll have to make do with my voice.]

The robed figures were too busy with their tumultuous discussion to hear his complaint.

In fact, properly speaking, there was no civil discussion going on at all; each one spoke over the next in the hope of advancing their own desires.

The "demon" took that opportunity to collect information on them from within the world.

I see. So this is some kind of brand-new religion? No, to call this a religion would be rude to those in this world who are actually faithful. It's more like the vestiges of a childish fondness for secret societies that they never managed to properly sublimate or grow out of.

And the reason they've even managed to gather like this at all is that the

bearded man in the middle has a certain amount of societal influence. Which has gotten them used by the Dormentaires.

The “demon” understood it all in an instant, almost as though he had looked directly into their pasts.

And, able to guess what might happen next, the “demon” offered the little sorcerers’ fan club in front of him one final warning.

[Just so you know—I have no knowledge of what will happen in the future. So if you tell me to give you precise information about what will happen later, I won’t be able to grant that.]

“Y-yeah. We know. That would really be the work of the gods.”

[...]

The “demon” fell silent and thought back on his past—

Of long ago, when he was created as an “embodiment of the universe” sealed inside a bottle.

Ronny was originally a nameless homunculus.

Although he was a living, conscious being capable of human speech, he was created as one with the entire universe—past, present, and future—and in exchange for being unable to leave the space he was sealed into, he had all knowledge at his disposal.

He even had the knowledge that the robed man called “the work of the gods”—knowledge of the future.

Furthermore, he could control the world itself as adroitly as though it were his own limbs or the tips of his fingers. If he wanted to, he could even freeze humans’ sense of movement such that it was like time itself had stopped.

After an exchange with his creator, the omniscient, omnipotent homunculus at last took human form and materialized in the world.

By giving up his knowledge of the future and some of his mental capacity, he cast his new form into a specific point of the universe that was his true form.

He took on the metallurgist’s name after his death and from then on had two

faces: one, as a being that some called a “demon,” and one as an ordinary person living his life—which brought him back to the present.

There were a few other “embodiments of the universe” like me created... but they all made the opposite choice, to keep their knowledge of the future in exchange for giving up a substantial portion of their ability to interfere with the world.

A human body could not contain all the knowledge and power that an embodiment of the world would have.

Thus they all had to abandon something, and this “demon” chose to give up his knowledge of the future and keep his ability to meddle with others and the world itself.

For that reason exactly, he was able to act in a way that could be considered “demonic.”

If they change the future based on the knowledge of the future they already have, the updated information appears in their heads automatically, so it must be convenient, but...

Since I was created as a way to relieve boredom, I think I was right to give up my knowledge of the future.

Remembering a female homunculus named Rosetta and others of her kind, the “demon” who had inherited his master’s name thought, *Relief from boredom...*

The Martillo Family certainly never leaves me bored. It’s a good organization.

I have superiors that I can respect, colleagues whom I can speak to frankly, and pupils I can enjoy teaching knife fighting to.

It’s a good environment.

No, a good... family.

The “demon” smirked in the darkness, and then spoke up one more time to the figures who were still arguing amongst themselves, their greed on full display.

[There's one more thing I should probably tell you.]

“.....?”

[I don't exist simply as a system that grants other people's wishes. And I am neither a just god nor an impartial judge from hell. I have my own human-like emotions, and the ideals and dreams to match. And given that those dreams were instilled in me by some ancient metallurgists, they're quite contrarian ones.]

“Wh-what do you mean by that?”

Was it going to tell them that it had tired of waiting and intended to go home?

As the robed figures had that thought, they began to worry, but the “demon’s” voice rang out disinterestedly once more.

[I made those metallurgists a promise. I am obligated to provide the knowledge sought by whomever summons me... But I *am* liable to get cross when my dreams and ideals—my desire to live a fulfilling life—are interfered with.]

“?”

Not sure what kind of life something called a “demon” might live, the robed figures frowned, but the disinterested voice simply continued to ring around them.

[So I have no reason to save any of you from danger for free. Maybe if some of you looked interesting, but... well, no matter.]

“What are you talking—”

Suddenly, the sound of an explosion rocked the ship.

“Wh-what was that?! What just happened?!”

As the man who appeared to be the leader began to panic, the “demon” answered, [You've been tricked by Melvi Dormentaire. I suppose he probably doesn't want the knowledge of immortality to spread to too many people. So he made you think that I could only be summoned out at sea like this and then set explosives on the ship to go off at the appointed time. Quite the complex

plan.]

“M-Melvi did what?!”

[In other words, no matter what knowledge all of you received from me, it was meant to sink with the ship.]

The “demon” spoke easily and decisively, and the robed figures began to murmur nervously.

But before they could begin to guess whether it was telling the truth, they heard another explosion, and panic overtook the deck.

Watching them, the “demon” made them an offer—one that could have been considered cruel, or perhaps tremendously merciful.

[Now, would you like the knowledge of how to be saved from this situation?]

[Specifically, I would recommend asking, “What should we offer to convince you to carry us safely to land?” The knowledge of immortality would also save your lives, but given the currents out here, you would probably just drown eternally... but no matter.]

A few minutes later.

Having transported everyone on the ship to dry land in exchange for removing all knowledge of how to summon him from their minds, Ronny found himself **summoned to the deck of another ship** before he knew it.

[...Out in the middle of the Pacific Ocean this time, huh? Well, no matter.]

When they heard his griping, the Japanese sailors raised their voices.

“That voice... has the *amabiko-nyûdô** come?!”

“I-it took so long, I was beginning to think it wouldn’t appear...”

[...I’m an *amabiko-nyûdô* now?]

“I-is that not what you are?!”

[No, that’s fine. Call me what you like. It doesn’t matter what I am called

here,] the “*amabiko-nyûdô*” a.k.a. “demon” Ronny Schiatto responded, and resolved to listen to the request of these hapless Japanese sailors—

But in his heart, he supposed that the same thing would happen consecutively, for just about three days.

He told the Japanese sailors where to find their ancestors’ buried treasure, but internally, he wore a wry smile.

So this is how he chooses to seal me.

Just how many people have been told how to summon me, I wonder?

Each of them having been told a slightly different time to begin the ceremony, so that I will be summoned over and over without a break.

If this happens again, it could hinder my work for the Family.

He would already be unable to involve himself in the events of Ra’s Lance or save Ennis on his own. But he had made his friends a vow that he would never abandon this work, either. Maiza and the others knew that in these cases alone he might sometimes have to leave his post, and it was for precisely that reason that the Martillo Family made sure they could hold their own without relying on Ronny if necessary.

But facing three days of consecutive summoning, Ronny was forced to rethink things.

I may have to make people forget how to summon me in exchange for granting their wishes in the future.

And I’d better make it clear to the Dormentaires that they are not to spread this information around so lightly.

Though in a few more decades, there probably won’t be many left who believe in things like demon-summoning rituals to begin with.

Well, no matter.

And so, he fulfilled their wishes.

Sometimes as a demon.

Sometimes as a messenger of God.

Sometimes as one of the many legendary monsters from across the globe.

Sometimes as an embodiment of the collective unconscious sleeping deep in the human mind.

They told him their various, outrageous desires.

But Ronny himself only had one wish in mind:

To end this charade as quickly as possible and wield his full power as a Martillo Family executive, as Maiza's friend, and as Firo's tutor.

Just that quiet, simple wish.

* An *amabiko-nyûdô* is a *yôkai* that is half-fish, half-human. They appear from the sea and portend anything from an abundant harvest to a pestilence.

1935-D Luckstreet Boys, Chapter 24: The Morning Should Not Be This Quiet

A shadow.

A shadow wrapped in a gray pelt galloped through New York under the cover of night.

An explosive sound had sent his bed toppling over, and in the confusion, the shadow had leapt out of his bed.

Sometimes swimming in the river, he crept recklessly through the city, searching for someone he knew.

Sometimes he heard screams from around him, but the shadow had no interest in them.

Those voices didn't sound like the "little ones" he knew at all.

The especially small one called him "Charlie" and brought him food every day.

The "little one" with distinctive red hair called him "Cookie" and was the shadow's friend back from the times when they were both showered with praise.

And the two dark "little ones" who were always around the smallest one kept saying "young master, young master" all the time.

The shadow couldn't find them anywhere.

An unknown land, unknown sights.

Afraid of the different atmosphere created by the skyscrapers around him, the shadow lurched from place to place, searching the unknown land.

Sometimes he smelled the scent of food, but the little ones near the food screamed and scattered when they saw him.

The shadow knew from a few years ago that screams were not good, so he left those places behind and moved through the city, avoiding the screams.

And then, just before the sun began to rise—he saw a “little one” wrapped in the same gray as him come out of a certain building.

The shadow tried to chase the gray figure, but the smell of the dried meat he loved was emanating from the building, so he stopped for a moment.

And as he slowly turned towards the smell, he saw the entrance door opening and closing.

“Dammit, that bastard Ladd and Graham are so rough with this door that it’s gotten out of alignment... Oh well. Since it’s meant to open in either direction, I guess it’ll be fine if we just open it one way...”

The voice of a man wearing white.

The shadow couldn’t understand what he was talking about.

And the man was focused on the door, so he didn’t notice the shadow.

As the man in white closed the door and went to lock it, there was a thud, and he saw the gray shadow through the door.

“Huh? Did you forget something, sir?” the man said, and laid a hand on the doorknob, but he immediately realized that something was off.

The gray shadow was much larger than one he called “sir.”

“Huh?”

As he froze, the door was pushed open from the outside—

And as he realized what the gray shadow was, the man in white passed out before he could even scream.



The second morning of the casino party happening at Ra’s Lance...

Opened with a curious disturbance in New York City.

With the city already on edge after the seaplane attacks a few days ago, reports of a “mysterious monster” began pouring in one after another.

There had been a late-night accident on a corner near the casino, and shortly after that, strange things began to happen in the area.

Some reported smelling a strange animal smell when they went outside in the morning.

Some homeless men sleeping on the side of the street reported seeing a giant shadow rush by.

Some reported seeing a black shape swimming in in the middle of the East River, illuminated by the rising sun.

Some reported seeing footprints by the river’s edge that could only belong to something much larger than a human.

Some reported hearing animal’s roar echoing in the night.

There were all sorts of rumors flying around, but by the time the sun had fully risen, they slowed, and soon the confusion had returned to normal, too. There had been few witnesses to begin with, and the pressure of the Depression meant that not many had time to enjoy themselves looking into the rumors.

There may have even been those who were so trapped that they would have wished, “If there is a monster, I hope it’ll smash this world to bits”—if only they’d had the time for it. But such people lacked the time, the fiscal leeway, and even the mental flexibility to share such rumors.

And, somewhere in Manhattan.

There was a pair who, though they lacked any sort of fiscal leeway, certainly had some emotional and mental flexibility.

“Hey, Miria. I thought of something incredible!”

“Oh, wow, Isaac, you’re amazing!”

“Really? It’s all thanks to you, Miria!”

“Oh, I’m so happy! Thank you, Isaac!”

A man and woman walked together, their words appearing to answer each other while completely failing to progress or, for that matter, even begin to approach an actual subject.

Though it may have looked like they were wandering around aimlessly, this couple—Isaac and Miria—were in fact wearing two hats these days.

Those who saw them around town often might not have believed it, but they both were helping out at the clinic of a doctor named Fred, and helping the Martillo Family out at the Ra’s Lance casino party.

It was a strange situation they found themselves in, working completely different jobs by day and by night, but Miria spoke up without a trace of such complicated matters in her innocent voice.

“What is it, what is it? What’s the incredible thing you thought of, Isaac?”

“Heh heh heh, hold onto your hat, Miria... I’ve figured out a way to win every time you gamble! It’s a sure thing!”

“Incredible!”

As Miria’s eyes shone, Isaac bragged, “All right... First, I bet one dollar. What do you think happens if I lose?”

“You lose even though it’s a sure thing?”

“...You’re right. My foolproof strategy lost, Miria. What’s going on?!”

“It’s a mystery! A horror! A thriller!”

Isaac “hmmmmmm”ed for a moment, and then finally clapped his hands together loudly.

“I’ve got it! The other guy must have cheated! He must be a con man...”

“Aaah! We’ll be tricked!”

“Don’t worry, Miria. My plan is so foolproof that I’ll make buckets of money no matter how much that con man fools me! I’ll be able to buy back the Eiffel Tower and rake in a ton of life insurance!”

“Incredible! You’re like Victor Lustig! And Thérèse Daurigniac!”

While Miria spouted the names of the con man who falsely sold the Eiffel Tower and the woman who had perpetrated an enormous inheritance scam, Isaac grinned bashfully and continued explaining his “sure thing.”

“Anyway. If I lose that first dollar, next I bet two dollars. If I lose that, too, next I bet four dollars. Do that ten times and I’m bound to win at least once, right? And just how much will I be betting if I keep that up one hundred times?”

“Umm... 1, 2, 4, 8, 16, 32, 64, 128, 256, 512, 1024, 2048, 4096... Oh, no, Isaac, I’ve lost count—how many times was that?”

“It’s okay, I have no idea either! The point is, I’ve got to win sometime! And if I win when I bet \$1024, I’m almost scared to think how what I’ll get back compares to what I’ve lost...!”

“Oh my gosh! Isaac, you’ll be rich!”

They rejoiced over nothing together.

But today there was someone to speak up from behind them and rain on their parade.

“If you’re getting back double what you put down, you’re never gonna earn more than a dollar at a time like that.”

“Wha?!”

Isaac and Miria turned to see Firo Prochainezo wearing a wearied expression.

After hearing that the two of them had been attacked by mysterious assailants, Firo had been making up coincidental excuses to casually accompany them on their way around the city.

They weren’t the only ones; ever since Ennis had been abducted, a number of Martillo Family associates, particularly those close to Firo, had been assigned bodyguards.

Since Isaac and Miria had already been attacked and their actions tended to be completely unpredictable, Firo was guarding them himself.

He really would have preferred to rush off to save Ennis as soon as possible, but that didn't change the fact that Isaac and Miria were his good friends too, and he figured that if he ran off headlong to search for Ennis, he'd be playing right into Melvi Dormentaire's hands, so he was looking after them until the casino party.

"Besides, by the time you get to ten rounds, you're betting \$1024 or \$4096 or whatever... D'you even have that kind of money to begin with?"

Isaac wasn't completely wrong. What he described was the martingale, a so-called "sure thing" that had been known since about the time gambling became popular worldwide.

But there were plenty of issues with it: for instance, the fact that you'd never profit more than the amount of your original bet no matter how much you wagered. The fact that it was useless if the odds changed. The fact that you were limited by the contents of your wallet, and if you ran out of money before your losing streak ended, you would have just thrown a ton of money down the drain. And the fact that it was completely useless if the table you were at had an upper limit on how much *they* would wager.

Even under perfectly ideal circumstances for someone who had an infinite amount of money to gamble, though it was indeed a "sure thing," the trivial profit meant that it was more likely to be used by someone rich trying to put the screws to someone who didn't have as much to gamble by exponentially raising the stakes. In other words, it was only good for a psychological battle.

And since Firo was well aware that Isaac and Miria wouldn't be waging psychological warfare anytime soon, he'd cut into their conversation mercilessly, but—"Well, you know, as long as we work and earn money, it'll be all right!"

"Look, if you can earn \$4000 just by working, just stay on the straight and narrow to begin with! And you're still only gonna earn one dollar!"

"Which means that if we win a thousand times, we'll win a thousand dollars! What a windfall!"

"A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step! Rome wasn't built in a day!"

Firo could only shrug his shoulders at their unrelenting optimism.

“All right, fine, you guys have fun building Rome then.”

Man, if my casino had some rich customers who played fast and loose with logic like they do, my job would be a lot easier.

Firo was glad that the two of them hadn’t changed much after being attacked, but he still paid kept a close eye on his surroundings.

Neither Melvi Dormentaire nor the Runorata Family had made any excessive contact with him on the first day of the casino party. Melvi had said that their showdown would be on the third day, but Firo wasn’t letting his guard down.

I can’t trust a single word he says—especially not his claim that he’ll release Ennis if I win.

Even as flames seethed hotly within Firo, he paid even closer attention to his surroundings.

But those flames were not the black flames of hatred.

Held aloft by the candelabra that was the Martillo Family, they illuminated his way forward with a dazzling light.

He would save Ennis, and as *capo* serve as both shield and blade for the Family.

He may not have known what would happen far ahead of him, but with his immediate path clear, Firo was able to handle Isaac and Miria’s conversation normally right now.

No one yet knew how that flexibility would affect the showdown.

But that calmness did change his immediate fate in one way.



Fred’s clinic

“Alright, I’d better get back to my own j...”

Having safely delivered Isaac and Miria to the clinic, Firo suddenly felt uneasy.

“...Hey, Isaac.”

“What is it, Firo?”

“What’s up?”

Isaac and Miria, tilting their heads, apparently hadn’t noticed anything odd about the clinic. Firo frowned, wondering if he had things wrong. “Who’s usually in charge of locking up this clinic?”

“Oh, that’d be Who, the doctor’s assistant! Dr. Fred visits a lot of hospitals, see, so he doesn’t usually get here until after 10. So since Who is a live-in, he takes care of the inpatients. There aren’t any right now, though.”

“Take care of your health first! Boil things to sterilize them!”

Despite his strange, gray-clad appearance, Fred, the owner of this clinic, was apparently quite skilled, and other clinics often requested his help with surgeries and such. Firo had heard that much from Molsa Martillo, so even he knew Fred was trustworthy even without having interacted with him directly.

That was exactly why Fred often traveled around to other hospitals before the clinic opened at 10 a.m.—but for some reason, the door to the clinic had been left slightly open this morning.

“Look, the door’s half-open, are they airing the place out or something?”

“Huh? Now that’s odd. Who’s the type who’s usually really careful about things like that. He gets angry at us if we leave the door open!”

“Oh, but after all that fighting, he said that the door wasn’t fitting in the frame right anymore, remember?”

“...I see.”

Maybe someone had just left the door open so they could move things outside.

But Firo couldn’t shake the unease clinging to the back of his throat.

What if there’d been some kind of trouble, and someone under Melvi’s orders had come by to attack again and was lying in wait for these two inside?

No... they wouldn't leave the door wide open if that were the case, right?

Maybe someone had just come to rob the clinic of the charity rations it distributed?

That's not it either, Firo's instincts told him.

Why?

Because there was some kind of animal smell.

And not quite like the smell of the horses that some New York police used—

It smelled almost like a dog that had been fed nothing but meat.

Firo passed by Isaac and Miria and headed for the clinic's entrance.

"What's wrong, Firo?"

"Are you sick? The doctor's not here yet!"

"Sorry, I'm just feeling a little paranoid."

Firo brushed off their concerned questions and continued forward, peeking carefully inside—only to find a man collapsed on the floor.

"...!"

Firo dashed to the man fallen by the reception desk and took his pulse.

Apparently he'd only passed out; both his breath and his pulse were normal.

As he breathed a sigh of relief, Isaac and Miria came inside.

"Huh?! Is Who dead?!"

"Don't worry, he's breathing."

"Oh thank goodness... Is he asleep?"

"Because he's been working so hard lately?"

"Maybe it's rough carrying everything around."

Having concluded that he was sleeping instead of passed out, Isaac and Miria were relieved and confused in equal measure.

Firo asked, "Is it hard work, bringing food out to the workers?"

“I dunno. Is it? What do you think, Miria?”

“It’s fun when I’m with you, so it’s not too hard at all!”

“Yeah, nothing’s hard when I’m with you, Miria!”

“Aww, Isaac, I’m so happy!”

Ignoring the two of them as they chattered away like cheerful children, Firo crouched next to the unconscious young man to try to wake him up.

But then he realized—the man’s cheeks and collar were wet.

And there were a few strands of grayish, brownish fur stuck to his clothing.

“Wow, Who must’ve been really tired to just fall asleep on the floor like that.”

“He’s like Sleeping Beauty! Or Sennen-Netarô*!”

As Miria spouted the names of characters from a fairy tale and one of the Japanese folktales Yaguruma had told them, she suddenly spotted a pile of blankets in the inner corner of the clinic.

“Hey, Isaac, are those blankets what we’re going to be transporting today?”

“Huh? Whoa, there are so many of them!” When Isaac looked where Miria had pointed, he saw an enormous pile of rumpled-up blankets that was taller than any of them. “It’s like a little mountain of them... No wonder Who got so tired, getting all of this ready!”

Isaac leaned on the pile of blankets, enjoying their softness.

“Oh, Isaac, that looks like so much fun! I want to try!”

And so Miria, too, leaned against the blankets, bouncing her back against them.

Firo watched the two of them bounce against the blankets in turn, alternating like a pair of walking feet, and gave a sigh. “Come on, guys, stop playing with the charity blankets and help me get this guy to a bed...”

Suddenly, he stopped speaking.

Hey, isn’t...

As the two of them bounced, the mountain of blankets also moved rhythmically.

There was nothing unnatural about that when it was phrased that way, but...

Isn't it... moving a little too much?

The pile of blankets shuddered in a way that was obviously too much to be recoil from their actions.

As it did, the blankets began to fall away one by one, and an enormous grayish, brownish shape began to peek out between them.

Wait...

That's... not a blanket.

And, as if in answer to Firo's doubts and his frantically beating heart, the pile of blankets gave one last huge shake, sending Isaac and Miria careening forward.

"Whaa?!"

"Eek!"

Isaac and Miria hit the floor hard and then turned back to the blankets, trying to figure out what had just happened.

What they saw was a huge, furry mass.

It wasn't a blanket at all: that fur hid an enormous amount of fat and muscle.

And it had the limbs and face to match.

As Firo, Isaac, and Miria gaped up at it, the gigantic shape blinked its round little eyes and stood up on its hind legs, its head scraping the ten-foot-high ceiling, and gave a growl.

"Grrroh?"

The growl let out by the ten-feet-tall grizzly bear was drowned out by Isaac and Miria's screams— And the screams of Who, who had only just awakened.

Thus the morning of the second day of the casino party began.

Although Melvi Dormentaire and Huey Laforet may have believed they saw through every inch of the city— Even they could not have foreseen this meeting between the innocent beast and the Camorrista.



Ra's Lance Penthouse floor

The upper floors of the Ra's Lance skyscraper served as a hotel for the wealthy.

And among them, the grand suite rooms on the uppermost floors—large enough to host parties in—required more than riches to access. Only the chosen could stay there.

The first “chosen one” to stay in such a room was a child young enough to still be called a boy, Carzelio Runorata—and he was casting a worried gaze out the window.

“I hope Charlie’s okay... What if he’s hungry?”

Two voices spoke up from behind him in answer.

“Please do not worry, young master. I am sure Charlie is fine. He’s simply a little lost because he doesn’t know anything about the city.”

“Yeah, and we’ve told the police he’s friendly, so he won’t be hurt.”

“By the police, you mean.”

Carzelio—often called Cazze—looked as innocent as most children his age at first glance, but on second glance he was much more quick-witted than his peers.

And on third glance, one might notice that he had a few screws loose—enough to think nothing of keeping a giant grizzly bear as a pet named Charlie.

“What if he fights with the other Mafiosos? He might get shot, or cut... He could even die...”

The Mafiosos themselves would probably take some serious damage before they could get that far.

The two bodyguards stationed behind Cazze—Gabriel and Juliano—had that

thought, but instead of mentioning it, they simply spoke in order to reassure their master, Bartolo Runorata's grandson.

"Don't worry. We will go search for him as well. Won't we, I?"

"You got it, me. If anyone tries to hurt Charlie, we'll do whatever it takes to stop 'em."

They didn't mention, *Even if we have to choke the life out of them.*

Cazze was innocent and a bit out there, but he was not the type to delight in cruelty.

For now, at least. The twins were well aware that his spotless personality might one day be corrupted by his circumstances.

But they would not let themselves be the ones to corrupt him.

With that determination firmly in mind, the two of them conversed with Cazze no further and left the room behind them to carry out their job.

The twins looked at the dozen-odd sturdy men lining the hallway and refocused themselves.

"Do you think someone might come, I?" Gabriel asked his brother, eying the overblown show of security.

"Dunno. Who d'you think would come, me?"

Carzelio was being referred to as the casino party's guest of honor, but he had no real influence over the proceedings.

At the same time, though, he was Bartolo's legitimate grandson—one of very few blood relatives. On top of that, he was relatively well-liked within the Family. All of this together meant that he would have made quite the valuable hostage.

But there were so many people who might have come after this organization that it was impossible to narrow the list of potential assailants down to just one or two.

Not only were there rival Mafia families, but this time there was a strange group called the Martillo Family with connections to the Camorra involved. It

didn't seem that they were tied to the main Camorra back in Naples, but it was clear that they were not an outfit to take lightly, and even if they had been a pitiful, incompetent group, the Runoratas still wouldn't have cut corners with security.

There was also the man who'd stepped in as the Runoratas' new dealer, Melvi Dormentaire. On paper, he was a collaborator sent by Huey Laforet's organization, but they didn't trust Huey's collaboration with the Runorata Family as far as they could throw him in the first place.

And on top of that, not only the twins but everyone with sharp instincts had the sense that Melvi had not sworn Huey any particular oath of loyalty.

It seemed that he valued his family connection to the House Dormentaire more. Which meant that there was a considerable possibility that the Dormentaires—officially unaffiliated with the Runoratas—could seek to use Carzelio.

A single glance revealed potential enemies on every side.

But there was no time to waste worrying about that.

Nor was there any reason to really worry about it.

They were the Runorata Family.

Even if the entire world turned against them, they would always be the ones to strike first, biting through the enemy's throat. They would always be the fangs that severed the enemy's carotid artery.

Faithful hounds ruled by such madness and sense of fellowship—that was who made up the Runorata Family's security team.

Not just Gabriel & Juliano, but every single member of the security team burned with that fire.

And all of these insane, faithful hounds answered to the innocent Carzelio Runorata.

His true wisdom had yet to be displayed—but regardless of the boy's capacity for growth, they had built an unbreakable fortress to compensate for his naïveté.

And all of those who knew of the Runoratas' true strength also understood the reverse: That the only ones who would challenge them were the insane men of valor who saw the Runoratas' strength and stood before them anyway — Those ready to snap their opponents' necks in the final moment before their own throats were torn open.



The same day Morning Little Italy

From the basement of "Coraggioso," the jazz hall that served as the Gandor Family's base of operations, Ladd Russo's voice could be heard.

"What now? I was so bored I almost lost it last night. When's the beatdown gonna start?"

From his face, it was clear that he wasn't kidding; he was honestly disappointed that there hadn't been any violence the night before.

Ladd was temporarily employed as a bodyguard for the Gandors, but since he'd apparently been picturing a scene with tommy gun bullets flying every which-way starting on the very first night, the reality had left him terribly unsatisfied.

The youngest Gandor brother—Luck Gandor—had grasped his personality in the few short days he'd known him. Dispassionately, he told his guest, "Everyone is probably still assessing the other organizations, trying to figure out who's on their side and who could become their enemies. Besides, even though the Runoratas are hosting this, there may be preexisting antagonism between other organizations to take into account."

"Yeah, I guess that's true. And even if they've got a pact in place, that doesn't mean everyone's all buddy-buddy."

"That said, everyone wants to avoid causing a mess and being seen as a source of trouble... especially by larger organizations like the Runoratas who might, to cut a long story short, have an interest in seeing such trouble break out. That may even be why everyone devoted themselves to waiting and watching last night."

"Well, I know an easy way to tell who's for us and who's against us. All we gotta do is find someone connected to the Runoratas and slug 'em. Anyone who takes aim at us for that is an enemy, and anyone who jumps in front of the bullets is a friend."

Ladd spoke like he was joking, but if someone told him to do something crazy like that, he really would—without hesitating for an instant. And he'd probably stand in the center of it all, laughing, as the corpses piled up around him. But Luck had no intention of giving him such an order. In fact, he might have to explicitly order him *not* to do something like that.

Though he *was* prepared, depending on the circumstances, to take aim at the Runorata Family if need be.

"We have had several organizations approach us with offers of alliance in relation to this matter, each with their own reason. Some of them want to use us as pawns or diversions against the Runoratas; others tried to offer to crush the Martillos and hand over a slice of their territory to the Gandors."

"Oh? So who did we team up with, *amigo*?" asked Maria Barcelito, the katana-wielding bodyguard of the Gendor Family, in excitement. Like Ladd, she was eager for trouble to break out.

But Luck was quick to rain on her parade, casting a cool gaze at her and shaking his head. "We turned them all down. To team up with them, or even lend them our strength, might reveal weak points that could later be used against us. If this were ordinary business, we may have considered it, but in an unstable conflict like this one, we have no intention of making any such agreements."

"Hah! That's pretty cautious of you, considering you've hired me," Ladd said with a shrug of his shoulders. But Luck must have won some of his respect, because he backed down without any particular counterargument. "I didn't see that Melvi prick or that red-headed bastard anywhere yesterday."

"Even if you see them during the party, I ask you not to strike out at them *unprovoked*," Luck said, emphasizing the word "unprovoked."

The implication that he would be allowed to fight back if they attacked first was clear.

"Heh... Boy am I glad that you're not telling me to just sit back and take anything they dish out."

"If we intended to be *that* cautious, we never would have hired all of you in the first place. We have fought with the Runoratas before, after all. Whatever this Melvi's overall status may be, I doubt he is higher in the Runorata Family than Gustavo was."

"Hm? Gustavo?"

Seeing the way Ladd narrowed his eyes, Luck added, "Ah, excuse me. Gustavo is the name of the Runorata executive who fought with us a few years back. I believe he's still in prison at the moment."

"Gustavo. Gustavo..."

Ladd felt like he'd heard the name before. He spent a few moments thinking it over; but, failing to remember anything, he concluded that even if he'd met a Gustavo, he must not have been particularly impressive, and decided not to worry about it.

As a matter of fact, Gustavo had fancied himself top dog at the first prison Ladd had been locked up in, and Ladd had just knocked his lights out as a matter of convenience, so there really was nothing to worry about.

"Well, trash like that aside, I'm real glad to hear that you guys are willing to pick a fight with the Runoratas," Ladd said with a leer, rubbing his real hand over his false one.

As he imagined slamming that false hand into the face of the red-headed monster who'd been stupid enough to tell him *I am a man who will never die*, he smiled like a man lost in a daydream of winning big in a game of poker.

But Ladd was not the only one stoking the flames of that hope.

Many of the bodyguards employed by the Gandors, Maria included, had some kind of grudge against the hitman known alternately as Claire Stanfield or Felix Walken.

Clutching the warped desire to surpass the legendary hitman known as

“Vino,” they approached the gambling table willing to use even their own lives as chips.

Luck was well aware of that, but as Claire’s childhood friend who thought of him as a brother, Luck thought, *I can’t imagine that Claire will lose, but it’s impossible to say for certain.*

No matter how good or bad the odds are, a bet is still a bet.

So who’s the bookie for this particular gamble?

Anytime people came together to gamble, someone was bound to rise up to play bookie and take their bets.

And that person was sure to profit.

The bookie sought out that role specifically in order to profit.

There could never be a gambling den whose bookie controlled everything for free—in fact, such a thing must not exist. The profit itself became a guarantee for the bookie, giving them reason to maintain an even betting field.

At least, that was Luck’s opinion.

On the other hand, he remembered that Claire himself had once said something like, “You think so? I bet there are some people who might play bookie for free. Like someone who thought it was their duty to balance everyone’s fates on their own shoulders, or someone who just liked gambling and wanted a front-row seat to the games. But I guess people like that would be getting a kind of payment, if you count emotional satisfaction as payment.”

A gambling spot’s not worth much trust if they don’t pay out in something people can clearly see, but... what Claire said has its own logic to it.

In any case, there might yet appear that someone would take bets on the gamble that was the showdown between Claire and the other hitmen.

It would be the Gandors’ role to go behind that bookie’s back, kick them off their throne and take their seat.

With that in mind, Luck took a deep breath.

The morning was quiet.

At least, there was no sign of trouble in their immediate vicinity.

But with the table set like this, there was no way that everything would go off without a hitch.

With a glance at his brothers standing behind him, Luck braced himself.

No matter what happened, the brothers would cut their way through using their own power—the Family’s power.

And that was why it was important to remain on guard for possibilities they hadn’t even imagined themselves.

Luck looked over the hitmen that might have been considered trouble itself, imagined every conflict they might find themselves wrapped up in, and resigned himself to the fact that his imagination most likely fell short of reality— That somewhere in the city, something he never could have predicted was bound to happen.



And as a matter of fact, something completely unexpected was happening at that very moment.

Not to Luck directly, but to his childhood friend, Firo.

“H-hey, guys, what are you doing? Isaac? Miria?”

Back to the strange, normally unthinkable meeting inside the clinic.

Firo had been as scared as the others by the sudden appearance of a giant grizzly bear, but he didn’t panic or scream.

Alright, if worst comes to worst, Isaac, Miria, and I are all immortal, so a bear attack’s not gonna kill us. That just leaves this guy... I’d better hide him somewhere...

But when he’d tried to pick up the fallen Who off the ground, he found Isaac and Miria sprawled out on the floor, their hands folded.

The bear itself looked at them and dropped back down to all fours, tilting its

head and sniffing at the air.

“We’re playing dead! Firo, come on, you too!”

“Mr. Yaguruma said that if you meet a bear, you have to play dead or sneak into its den or stick your hand down its throat to suffocate it!”

Isaac and Miria explained their strategy to Firo at the top of their lungs, posing like corpses all the while.

Play dead if you meet a bear.

This would later be proven to be a baseless superstition, but there was a reason the idea spread in the first place. Here and there across the world, there were cases of people who’d survived bear attacks because they’d happened to be asleep or otherwise hadn’t moved a muscle. But it was more likely that in those cases, the bear had already obtained a different prey and had no interest in the person in question, or their motionlessness caused the bear to decide that they weren’t a threat. The real strategy was to move slowly, being careful not to startle the bear in any way—and in the end, it all came down to luck.

Unaware of this, Isaac and Miria continued to startle the bear.

“Uh, Miria, how can we play more dead than this? How should we move?”

“Wait, a moving corpse? Isaac, that would have to be a vampire!”

“That’s it! We’ll be vampires! I’m sure he’ll be able to tell we’re corpses then!”

“Like Bram Stoker! Or Sheridan Le Fanu!”

As Miria spouted the names of authors who’d written vampire novels, she got slowly to her feet and wrapped a blanket around herself like a cape, keeping an eye on the bear.

“B-but Isaac, how do we play vampire?”

“I guess we have to turn into bats... and suck blood...”

Isaac stood up too, clutching a blanket in the same way, and cautiously began

to flap the ends of the blanket up and down like a bat's wings.

Watching him, the bear stopped moving and sniffed at its surroundings once more.

"Guys, just stop freaking the thing out!"

Shoving the unconscious Who into the next room and closing the door, Firo took out a knife and decided he was going to have to distract the bear himself.

"Hey! Over here! I've got your breakfast right here, grizzly!"

I guess? But what next?

If this thing gets outside, the city's gonna go crazy.

But it's not like I can take it out with this little knife.

I'm gonna need these two to call the police...

Dammit, what happens if an Immortal regenerates inside a bear's stomach?

Firo resigned himself to the possibility of being eaten by the bear and opened his mouth to shout again, ready to draw its attention, but— "Huh?"

As he watched, the bear scooped Isaac and Miria up by the legs and tried to throw them onto its back.

"Whoa?!"

"Eeek!"

They landed on the bear's back but rolled onto the floor before they could catch their balance.

Tilting its head, the grizzly turned away from the two of them and lowered itself as much as its joints would allow.

Almost as if it were telling them to climb on.

"Does this bear belong to someone...?"

A few minutes later.

Watching Isaac and Miria chatter away as they sat on the bear's back, Firo

sighed in both relief and bafflement.

There were food rations piled up in a corner of the room, next to the blankets, and one of the boxes of jerky had clearly been torn open and rifled through.

"So it escaped from somewhere? And then it smelled all the jerky here and wandered over..."

But he had no idea where it could have escaped from.

A circus?

There *had* been some kind of tent set up in the plaza in front of Ra's Lance, come to think of it.

"Okay, so, what next? The police? Should I just go ahead and call the police?"

It was good that the bear seemed more likely to play with humans than eat them, but that didn't change the fact that it was dangerous.

"If it's from a circus... No, I can't call him now."

Firo thought of a red-headed man who'd once been in the circus, but he was pretty much Firo's enemy right now.

Besides, just because he'd been in the circus didn't mean that he was an animal tamer. He might not have been able to do anything even if Firo did call him.

Oblivious to Firo's concern about what to do next, Isaac and Miria were enjoying themselves atop the bear, not a care in the world.

"It's amazing, Miria! We've learned to ride a bear!"

"Yay! Isaac, you're so cool!"

"I've heard about this... There's a place called Ashigara Mountain where they decide whether or not you'll get ahead in life based on if you can ride a bear! The really impressive ones become *daimyo* and get to do as much sumo wrestling as they want, and they practice on bears and make it to *yokozuna***!"

"A living god! A thunderbolt!"

Is that from Mr. Yaguruma again?

Firo couldn't follow what they were saying, but based on the word "yokozuna" or whatever, he was pretty sure they must've been talking about something that Yaguruma, an Asian man who was one of Firo's superiors, had told them in order to entertain himself.

I'm pretty sure these two are remembering everything wrong... but I feel like Mr. Yaguruma gets a kick out of that, too, Firo thought, smiling wryly as he thought of the surprisingly mischievous man.



Meanwhile, Isaac and Miria continued their hapless conversation on the bear's back.

"Umm, there was a song about Kintarô, right? 'High and low, low, high, low, low***'... something like that!"

"Like high and low gambling odds!"

"In other words, we'll win all our bets today!"

"Oh my gosh! Thank you, Mr. Bear!"

Despite the fact that Isaac and Miria had been screaming earlier, their fear had disappeared the instant they realized that the bear was a friendly one.

That's really a talent of theirs, in a way...

Come to think of it, they got used to all of us in the Camorra pretty quick, too, didn't they?

Firo may have been imagining it, but it sure looked like their cheerful voices had put the bear in a good mood, too.

Man... we really lucked out here.

Firo was only able to stay calm because the three of them were immortal; if anyone else had wandered in off the street, they probably would have panicked, whether the bear looked happy or not. Firo was silently grateful that they'd made it through this accidental encounter with the bear.

What do they call this in the Orient, again? Mr. Yaguruma says it all the time...

Firo thought for a second and then hit upon the word, smirking to himself as he said it out loud.

"I guess... this is my *genkatsugi***** for the day."

Image was once again provided by [michinyong](#).

*Sannen-Netaro is a character from Japanese folklore who slept for three years.

**Yokozuna is the highest rank in sumo wrestling. This whole exchange between Isaac and Miria is an, um, *reinterpretation* of the Japanese folk hero Kintarō, the Golden Boy. The thunderbolt in Miria's response probably refers to the thunderclap that impregnated Kintarō's mother in some versions of the legend.

***That's not how the song goes.

****A good luck superstition.

1935-D Luckstreet Boys, Chapter 25: There's Nothing for the Lowlife to Do

Same day Morning Millionaire Row

"All right, I see what you're saying... now get out of here."

That statement from Pamela, the woman sitting across the table from Nader Schasscule, was like a punch to the gut.

"Um, excuse me? Miss? This isn't exactly your house, you know," Rail, the child with the scarred face, interjected from next to them.

A few feet back, the eyes of another child—Czeslaw Meyer—shone as he observed Nader and Pamela.

They were all currently in the Genoard manor that served as the headquarters of Jacuzzi's gang of delinquents.

The delinquents themselves, Jacuzzi included, were still asleep, so Rail had brought Czes, Nader, and Pamela down to the basement, which was mostly used for storage.

Let's turn back the clock to the previous night.

Nader, having noticed something suspicious in Pamela's actions, had contacted her in the hope of teaming up with her, but that was when he was ambushed by Liza and Chané.

Rail and Czes managed to save him in the nick of time, and they'd all escaped together.

Furthermore, thanks to the smoke bomb they'd used to avoid the ambush,

there had been a traffic accident, and a giant grizzly bear had escaped from the overturned truck—but none of these four knew that yet.

Czes and Rail had made up something random about their own identities and only revealed that they were fighting against that flock of birds (Liza) for now.

That news alone seemed like a relief to Nader, and he calmed down quite a bit—enough to drop little bits of information about himself between occasional breaks.

Of course, he wasn't offering that information on his own so much as answering the questions that Czes, Rail, and Pamela (who found herself wrapped up in all of this) asked in turn.

By the time they learned that Chané and Liza were after Nader because he'd betrayed Huey in the past, Rail and Czes had heard enough— But Pamela, who should have been no more than a passerby, seemed to have even more of a connection to Nader. She demanded the full details of what Nader had been doing with himself from the moment he left his village until the present.

And once she'd heard everything, she took a deep breath and made her original statement: the demand for him to get out.

"Oh, I don't mean for you to misunderstand me, sorry. I'm not kicking him out of the house. I mean, if you tell me to get out, I will... But I'm telling this sorry bum to leave the city."

That was even worse than just being kicked out of the house, but Nader couldn't object.

Instead he asked, "Hey... you said your name was Pamela?"

"Yeah."

"You know Sonja, right?"

"...Yeah."

Sonja had been a childhood friend of Nader's—a girl raised by a family that worshipped guns.

He understood that Pamela knew Sonja, but all he knew so far was that the two were acting together for now.

Pamela had promised to tell him about herself if he talked, so Nader had told his story first, and he hadn't had a chance to ask for the details of her relationship with Sonja yet.

"I guess... you don't want me to meet Sonja because you know her, right?"

"...Basically, yeah."

"Because I'm the worst of the worst?"

"I wouldn't say you're the *absolute* worst. Based on what you've told me, you've started to crawl your way up from that. ...I guess you're a lowlife, at best."

After telling half his life story with his own lips, Nader had fallen into a deep self-hatred.

He was already well aware that he was the worst, but having just described his life, he was more aware than ever of what a worthless existence he'd led.

"...Aren't you going to object?"

"Not really. Makes sense that a friend of Sonja's wouldn't want me to see her. I get that."

"Look, it doesn't matter to me how much of a lowlife you are. I've cheated casinos and carried out petty robberies myself, so I'm no saint, and I'm not exactly a good influence on Sonja. Frankly, if you were gonna slug me, I wouldn't complain." Pamela flashed a brief, self-deprecating smile across the table at Nader before her face grew serious once more. "But... if you're going to keep being scum like this, I'm sorry, but... I don't want you to show yourself to Sonja. Anyone else, I wouldn't care. But you, Nader Schasscule... I don't want you to see her if you're just a lowlife."

"..."

"She believes in you, you know. She thinks that no matter what happens, you're going to turn into a hero and save her if things get too dangerous. That you're going to be her hero and come back to her. ...I'd better ask, is that an

expectation she came up with on her own? Or..."

Nader shook his head in response to Pamela's question. "No, she didn't come up with it on her own... I really did... say that to her. To Sonja."

Nader teared up at the thought of his own pitifulness as he spoke—or maybe at the thought of the promise he'd made, the one he had completely forgotten when he was working under Huey.

"I told her I'd be a hero..."

When I grow up, I'm gonna be a hero!

"Just like the heroes straight out of history..."

Like Wyatt Earp and Jesse James!

"I said I'd get strong..."

You watch, I'll get super strong! You'll see!

"And I said I'd... protect her..."

And when I do... can I protect you, too?

The memory that he was so sure he'd forgotten was clear as day now.

He'd made that promise when he was still so young.

He'd made that promise to the girl who was even younger than he was.

The girl, his neighbor, had looked at him with admiration in her eyes.

And, even though she didn't care about the world around her, the girl looked at him, and without a hint of doubt in her innocent smile, she said, "Okay! It's a promise, Nader!"

He remembered the face Sonja had made now.

He felt like he could hear her speaking to him right now.

"Yeah, we... we made a promise, alright... me and Sonja."

Nader spoke haltingly, clenching his fist.

Seeing the regret on his face, Pamela didn't scorn him any further. But she still had to think of Sonja, so she still spoke strictly.

"Sonja... is really kind, so even if you kept being a lowlife... I'm sure she'd still forgive you. In fact, I think she'd still keep believing sincerely that you could become a hero one day. Can you live up to that?"

Pamela's voice got louder as she spoke.

Whenever Sonja had spoken of Nader, Pamela had imagined what she'd say if she ever met him—and now all those words were pouring out of her one after another.

"That girl has been calling your name all this time. When we were being chased by the Mafia, when we were surrounded by the police, when our truck flipped in an accident—she never doubted you, just kept saying 'We'll be fine, Nader will come save us!' You never did come to help, but she still believed in you. Can you imagine that? Even after the Mafia's bullets grazed her cheek?"

"..."

"Can you live up to that? Can you live up to her pure image of you—to her wishes? Her faith in you? Can you give her real happiness, not just something superficial?"

"I..."

I can, he wanted to say.

But Nader knew better than anyone else that that was impossible.

"...If I said I would, I'd be fooling myself. I'd tell myself I'd become a hero tomorrow. Or the next day. Or next week, next year... I'd let myself believe that, and then... I'd keep betraying Sonja. Oh, I would, I know I would! Goddammit! **That's just how I am!**"

"...Then I guess I really don't want you and Sonja to see each other. I want her to keep believing that you're off being a hero somewhere. I don't want to lie to her, but I don't think it would help either of you for you to meet now."

"Yeah... I agree 100%. Honesty, I don't even know how I'd act if I did see her." With sadness in his eyes, Nader clenched his fist on the table and stared down at it as he asked Pamela, "Just tell me. Sonja... is she well?"

"...She is. I can guarantee that much."

"She's almost twenty now, right? I bet she's gotten taller."

"Not much taller, actually... She still looks like a kid all over. People would probably still believe that she's fifteen. I guess because she doesn't really get much exercise."

Pamela remembered how she'd mistaken Sonja for three or four years younger than she was when they first met and realized that Nader and Sonja struck her more like siblings than long-lost friends.

"I see... Yeah, she was always a little squirt. I guess I'm glad she's got someone like you. You seem like you've got your shit together better than me."

Nader's self-deprecating smile made Pamela uncomfortable.

"Knock it off. I've caused a lot of trouble for her too... I mean, she's saved my life a bunch of times."

"?"

"My companion and I used to pull off petty robberies and knock over casinos. And whenever the police or the Mafia caught up to us, Sonja would chase them away with her rifle. Like I said, I'm as much of a lowlife as you are."

"Sonja has a rifle?"

Nader frowned, but it wasn't like that was completely out of the blue.

He remembered hearing the sound of explosions from across the fields that separated his home from his neighbors'.

Gunshots from the forest that didn't sound like hunters' rifles.

And then the sounds would stop, and his friend would come out of the forest with her parents.

He'd been uneasy even then.

Nader's father had even told him not to get involved with the neighbors' family, but he'd never really understood why.

Just like Sonja didn't know what he was like now, Nader didn't know what Sonja had been like in the past.

More aware of that than he'd ever been, Nader turned towards Pamela.

"She's okay, right? You guys aren't doing those robberies anymore?"

"...We've halfway washed our hands of it all. But it seems like she's wrapped up in something scary now. My companion and I will do something about that."

"But..."

"I know I'm being selfish, but please, just trust me. ...Sonja's important to me too, you know."

Pamela wasn't lying. She and Lana were working as maids in the Beriam manor, but it was really Sonja's shooting skills that the senator was after; apparently, she was going to be shooting something on the casino party's last day under the instruction of Spike, who referred to the girl like she herself was a gun.

No one knew what she'd be shooting yet.

Beriam would most likely make up his mind in the next two days about who among the Mafia at the party was in his way.

But Pamela didn't want Sonja to kill anyone.

Pamela knew that was rich coming from someone who'd dragged her into petty crime, but this was the one line she didn't want Sonja to cross.

If worst came to worst, she'd take Sonja and escape.

She'd been using her particular talents at the first day of the casino party specifically to earn enough chips to fund an escape.

But if a man like this saw right through me, I must've really lost my touch.

"...If we're going to wash our hands of all of this completely, we're going to need to pay the price for removing a source of profit from the fray. Everything we earn is probably going to go towards that."

"By 'the fray,' you mean that casino party, right?"

"..."

Nader was a lowlife, but he wasn't an idiot.

After hearing his life story, Pamela knew that.

Maybe it would be better to let him in on some of her circumstances instead of leaving him in the dark and risk half-baked meddling.

Nader watched her as she thought it over.

A brief silence passed between the two of them, but it was Rail, listening to their story as an outsider, who broke the ice.

"I mean... You're calling yourself a lowlife scum and making fun of yourself, mister, but isn't it kind of impressive to have betrayed the Lemures?"

"Huh?"

"Goose was Huey's right-hand man, and Chané was a fanatic. Spike was a really good sniper. Out of all of Huey's men, the Lemures were top-class, elite troops. Even if there was something pretty fishy about them. If your coup had worked, I think that alone would have made you a hero!"

Rail spoke with a chuckle, but it was Pamela who responded, not Nader. She looked like she'd been hit with a sneak attack.

“A sniper... named Spike?”

“? You know him, Miss Pamela?”

“How... Wait... Nader, that story you told about your coup, how they were going to take the passengers of a train hostage... Do you remember when that was, roughly?”

“Huh...? Yeah, I almost died that day. It was at the end of 1931. ...Wait, are you saying... you know that bastard Spike?”

“...!”

Suddenly all the pieces fell into place in Pamela’s mind.

Spike, lying by the train tracks with serious injuries at the end of 1931.

The destruction of the terrorist cell called the “Lemures.”

And the skilled sniper named Spike that Rail had just referred to.

Pamela had no idea why a kid like Rail could identify the members of a terrorist cell, but judging by Nader’s reaction, there could be no mistake.

The Spike we rescued was with the terrorists who attacked the train?

But why would Senator Beriam employ someone like that?

As the pieces fell into place, new questions welled up inside of her.

But before she could even begin to guess at their answers, Nader leapt to his feet, his eyes wide.

“Wait, seriously, you know Spike?! You said Sonja’s been using a rifle... Are you telling me that guy’s close to her?!?”

“...”

Nader took her silence as a confirmation.

“Goddammit! I heard that all the Lemures were dead, but Chané and Upham survived and now you’re telling me that bastard Spike’s alive, too?!?”

“It doesn’t sound like you were friends...”

“Of course we weren’t friends! I know a traitor like me doesn’t have much footing to say this, but he’s the kind of guy who’s only loyal to whoever pays

him! He made like he was all in favor of my coup and helped out to begin with, but then he went to Goose so he could have his cake and eat it too...”

For a moment, the light of anger caught in Nader’s eyes as he remembered the past, but it quickly changed to unease instead.

“Hey, Spike’s not manipulating Sonja’s weak points or anything, is he? Is he threatening her? Who’s he working for right now, is he still with the Lemures?!”

Cursing herself for feeling shaken by Nader’s questions, Pamela gave up on hiding the truth from him.

But it was still going to take some resolve to explain everything.

Pamela may have been a lowlife, but she wasn’t enough of a monster that she wanted to inflict more despair than necessary onto the man who was Sonja’s friend.

“...Spike isn’t hurting Sonja in any way. They actually get along. He’s teaching her sniping.”

“Hey... wait, sniping...?”

“Sonja hasn’t shot anyone yet. But that might not last through tomorrow. Depending on the circumstances at tomorrow’s casino party, our employer might have Sonja shoot something... or someone.”

“Who’s your employer?! Is it Huey Laforet?! Or the Runorata Family?” Nader thought of Ladd Russo. “If it’s someone smaller than those two, I might be able to do something about it! I’ve got connections—they’re not great ones, but I have them!”

But Pamela’s answer was far beyond what he could have imagined.

“He’s a senator.”

“Huh?”

“Senator Manfred Beriam. Have you heard of him?”

“I... yeah, of course I have...”

Nader had been a member of the Lemures once.

If he hadn’t betrayed them, then he, too would have boarded that train as a

terrorist and taken a politician's family as hostages.

That politician was none other than Senator Beriam.

"Hold on... I know Spike's name came up a few times when I sold the Lemures out to the police... Come on, that's just weird, right? Spike was one of the people who took his family hostage... huh?"

"Money is what motivates Spike, right? You just said that."

"...!"

Nader was shocked and confused, but Pamela just spelled out the situation as she knew it.

"So if you're not careful, you might not just be turning terrorists and Mafiosi against you. You could make an enemy of the people who run the country... or of America itself."

The country was his enemy.

Nader felt trapped in the sensation that he'd returned to his past self, the version of him who had practiced terrorism under Huey's command.

But he realized that when he had been under Huey's command, his position had been far more hopeful than this one.

Now he had no armed militia standing behind him.

If he took this on, he would be turning the entire nation against himself and himself alone.



Around the same time In the Beriam manor

"Pamela hasn't come home yet, huh..." Sonja said, looking up from cleaning one of her guns to glance out the window.

Lana, who was tidying up the room, shrugged her shoulders and retorted,

"Well, she must think she's all that, staying out all night! I wonder what bar she spent the night at!"

She spoke as if she were irritated, but behind her glasses, her eyes had a shade of unease to them.

After all, Pamela had gone to Ra's Lance to do some cheating. Lana trusted her skill, but if she'd been found out, the worst case scenario could find her drowning in the East River.

Sonja must have sensed her unease.

As she continued to clean her gun, she smiled innocently and said, "It's okay, Lana. I'm sure Pamela will be fine."

"...How's that?"

"Nader will come and save her, for sure."

"Ahh... Nader again? He's a pretty convenient hero if he'd save a total stranger like Pamela. He'll get tired, saving everyone in the world like that."

Eventually, they'd have to convince Sonja to leave Nader behind.

Lana worried about Sonja's ability to think for herself when she brought up Nader again, but as she began to think of convincing her otherwise, Sonja spoke up once more.

"That's why I need to do my best, too."

"Huh?"

"I think Nader's going to have a hard time if he becomes a hero. He's really kind, so he'll try to save so many people that he'll never get a chance to take a break."

With a smile that suited her naïve words, Sonja finished taking care of her rifle and held the bloodthirsty weapon in her arms, murmuring to herself, "That's why I'll help. I'll help lots and lots."

Her last words had a hint of nostalgia to them.

"When I do... I hope Nader will look up to me."

↔

Around the same time Millionaire Row

“...It sounds like you two have quite the situation on your hands, huh?”

Once Pamela and Nader fell completely silent, Czeslaw Meyer, who'd been listening and observing the whole time, spoke up.

“So what are you going to do next?”

Czeslaw used his “innocent little kid” act to investigate the two's personalities further.

But internally, his mind was racing with all his experience as a two-hundred-year-old Immortal.

This is getting really strange.

I can't believe that train is coming up again.

Who does Senator Beriam want that Sonja girl to shoot?

What should I do? Should I try to get this information to Maiza and Firo?

No, I can't be sure that it's directly related to saving Ennis, and it might just distract them... I'll wait and see a little longer.

Czes kept his internal calculations to himself and turned his attention back to Pamela and Nader.

“...By the way, I've been meaning to ask... where am I? Whose house is this? Unless I'm imagining things, this is Millionaire Row, right?” Nader asked.

“It's a villa belonging to a family called the Genoards. Basically, Rail has basically been freeloading here for a while.”

“Me, freeloading? ...I mean, I guess you're right,” Rail said with a shrug. Nader's brow furrowed deeply.

“...Genoard? Genoard as in Eve Genoard?”

“Oh, come to think of it, you said you were acting as a standin for one of the Genoards. That's quite a coincidence... Do you need to get in touch with that Eve person or anything?”

"...I probably should. But if this place belongs to the Genoards, does that mean I can stay here?"

Judging by the nervous look on his face, he must have wanted some kind of base where he could hide from Chané and Liza. Czes shook his head regretfully.

"I'd better warn you, Miss Chané comes here sometimes."

"Wha...?!"

"Miss Chané and the delinquents living here seem like they're friends."

So I'm not too keen on staying here long, either.

The face of a certain red-haired man floated into Czes's mind.

Ughh, I want to go back to Alveare...

He'd told Firo, "Rail invited me over, so I'm going to spend the night at Jacuzzi's place."

Firo had said yes without much giving it much thought, probably concluding that Czes would be safer in a place where there were a lot of people.

On top of that, apparently this house was under surveillance by the Martillo Family, too; sneaking out and then sneaking Nader back in had not been easy.

Nader himself trembled when he heard Chané's name, his eyes roving around the room.

"O-oh, I see... I guess I'll go back to my place, then. I'd better disguise myself so that Liza doesn't find me..."

"Be careful, it takes more than a little disguise to fool Liza!" Rail said.

Nader twitched, but he took the fake beard, glasses, and cotton pads for changing his face shape out of his pocket and tried to figure out how to disguise himself.

That was when someone knocked on the door.

"Eek?!"

Nader gave an unthinking yelp, but gave a sigh of relief when the voice that

spoke from the other side of the door was a male one.

"Hey, how's it going? Are Nader and Pamela awake?"

"Oh, Shaft. You can come in," Czes called.

The door opened and a man that Nader knew came in. His name was Shaft, and he was apparently a friend of Graham Specter, who was like Ladd's little brother. Furthermore, he had been the one to help Nader and Pamela escape last night after the smoke bomb had gone off.

"Oh, it's you."

According to what Czes had said, when they'd gotten to the mansion, Shaft had helped draw attention away from them and then gone home for the night.

"Hello, Nader. I'm glad you're doing well."

"Y-yeah. But mentally I'm not doing too well at all."

"Oh, that's no good. If you're fainthearted, your body won't make it through the day."

"?"

Nader cocked his head at Shaft's strange pronouncement, but was Shaft continued, he quickly understood what he meant.

"...Graham and Ladd are calling for you. Uh, they're... calling you 'Mr. Gloomy'."

"Wh-what do they..."

"Who knows? There's no guessing what those two are thinking. Oh, but there's one thing I can tell you for sure."

Watching Nader make his pitiful faces, Shaft finally brought him some good news.

"If you spend your time with them, Chané and Liza may back off on their own," Shaft said with a firm nod. Then he averted his eyes and added unnecessarily, "That said, you could wind up in a different mess that will increase your chances of dying..."



About the same time Somewhere in New York Fred's Clinic

"Now just wait one goddamn... you... is this a joke?!"

As a bespectacled man stared down at him, the muscles in his cheek twitching, Firo shrugged.

"What's wrong? Your lowlife face is looking even lower than normal... You scared?"

"Shut up, you asshole! You... this... You asshole! What the fuck do you want me to do about this?!"

Victor Talbot had arrived at the clinic to see, soundly sleeping behind the reception desk and covered with a handful of blankets, one enormous grizzly bear.

Isaac and Miria were leaning against the bear sleeping just as soundly, and a few feet away, the clinic's owner, Fred, and a white-faced Who loitered, watching over the scene.

"Oh dear... Wild animals are not very hygienic... We'll have to wash away all his fur later."

"C-C'mon, this isn't the time to talk about things like that, sir! Is this okay?!"

"You shouldn't make a fuss unnecessarily. Don't worry. If this bear really wanted to kill us, he'd be able to take our heads off with one swipe of his claws. There's a good chance we'd die before we could feel any pain."

"That sounds like something to worry about to me...!"

Fred had placed a "Closed" sign on the door, so the only people in the clinic right now were Firo, a few investigators, and Who, Isaac, and Miria, who comprised the clinic's staff.

People might panic if they heard there was a bear in the neighborhood, so at the moment some of Victor's men were shooing people away with random excuses so that they wouldn't catch on.

"All of a sudden I get a call at the office, and it's you telling me to find this

massive fucking grizzly bear's owner? What kind of stupid idea is this, Firo Prochainezo?!"

"Well what'm I supposed to do? You're the only person I know who might be able to do something about this. Oh, by the way, it looks like it's friendly, so you better not shoot it or its owner's gonna be pissed."

"Thanks, that's just *great* to know! Ah-ha, I'm onto you. You want us to waste our time with trivial shit like this so you can go running at the Runoratas with a bomb under your shirt or something, don't you?"

"Geez, what a thing to say." Firo gave a light sigh and offhandedly added, "That's our last resort."

"..."

He seemed like he just might do it, and on top of that, as an Immortal, he could pull it off more than once.

Victor, who had been hit by something like a suicide bomber before, curled his lip and turned to Firo with a glare.

"So, what? Did you call me here to get revenge for sticking you in Alcatraz?"

"I mean, it was half to piss you off, yeah."

"Ugh, you little shit... What's the other half?"

"Does it look like Edward's gonna be okay?"

The name that left Firo's lips was that of a policeman he'd never gotten along with.

In recent years he'd been promoted to a member of the Bureau of Investigation, but his connection with Firo—such as it was—had gotten him ambushed by Melvi Dormentaire.

"Just whose damn fault do you think it is he got hurt?"

"So he's just 'hurt,' nothing worse. That's good news in a sea of bad."

"...Hmph. Think you can earn some points by pretending you care?"

"*I do* care. If you ever go off the rails, I bet Edward's the only one who'd be able to arrest you."

After that noncommittal answer, Firo narrowed his eyes and continued.

"That's only a quarter of the reason I called you. The last bit is that I have a simple question for you. ...Do you know anyone from the House Dormentaire?"

"What, did Maiza tell you that? ...Well, I *did* know them, in the past. No one who's still alive, though."

When he heard the name Dormentaire, Victor turned a nostalgic gaze out to the distance.

Then, realizing something, he glared at Firo.

"Hang on. Maiza be damned, you've got old man Szilard's memories. Isn't it faster to just access those?"

"What I want to know about is their current associates. In the last few years or so."

"What, you think the BOI is your own personal maid service or something?"

"I'm not asking for a partnership here. I'm just asking as Immortal to Immortal."

Victor scowled at Firo's words, and then made his face blank as he answered. "They've definitely been in decline. But it turns out they've been splitting up the fortune they've made from overseas trade and stashing chunks of it all over the world. Apparently it's all part of their centuries-long master plan for tax evasion."

"Yeah, it looks like some of their cash was making its way to Szilard, too. ... And he was using it to buy the rare materials he needed to make homunculi."

"..."

Firo's expression didn't change.

But Victor couldn't help but notice the way a wave of emotion passed through the depths of his eyes when he said the word "homunculi."

If he wanted Firo in his debt, now was his chance.

"I don't know the specifics, but I can give you an idea of where Ennis is."

"...Out at sea, right?"

"How—"

Victor's mouth gaped open as Firo stole his line.

"We're not idiots. We've got enough information to guess that much. And if you had specifics, they'd have to be something the Daily Days hasn't even gotten their hands on yet."

"You really are a little shit, you know that?"

So how do you plan to rescue her?

Victor almost asked him that, but he kept his mouth shut for two reasons.

One was that he had a feeling he wouldn't get a serious answer out of Firo.

The other was that he heard his subordinate's voice from behind him.

"Ah... Mr. Talbot, sir, could I have a moment?"

"What?"

Victor turned towards Bill Sullivan, his subordinate who always spoke in a relaxed tone, to see that he was scratching his cheek as if to say that things had suddenly gotten complicated.

"I recognize that bear, as it happens."

"You do?"

Firo, too, turned towards Victor's subordinate, Bill Sullivan.

"Eh... Well, you see... It's the grizzly bear that they've been keeping at the Runorata villa. Specifically, the one who's been looking after it is Bartolo's grandson, Carzelio Runorata."

And so fate began to tumble forward once more.

Not by an Immortal's doing, or by the influence of the underworld—but from a simple meeting between man and beast.

1935-D Luckstreet Boys, Chapter 26: There's No Way They'll Just Behave

A Runorata Villa

When Melvi showed his face at a Runorata villa located on the outskirts of New York, the previous dealer, Carlotta, called out to him.

"You do intend to make an appearance at the casino party tonight, don't you? Seems like you left it up to the other dealers and wandered off somewhere else last night."

"Yes, last night was for observing. I didn't want to reveal my hand too early."

"...Reveal it to whom, I wonder?"

"To anyone, including yourself. If Mr. Bartolo has other orders, of course, I will follow those."

Melvi made an attempt to shroud his motives in mystery with vague answers, but Carlotta turned cold eyes towards him.

"I don't know what your real goal is, nor do I care, but if you think you're using the Runoratas then we're going to want some compensation for it. Not that I have any right to force you—so consider this a request from me."

"Don't worry, I will be there tonight. I have to set the stage for tomorrow, after all... And I do intend to bring benefit to this organization."

"...Is that so."

Carlotta narrowed her eyes and looked Melvi Dormentaire over for a few seconds; then she heaved a sigh and said, "I don't think Mr. Bartolo promoted you for the sake of profit, so I'm not expecting you to rake in much for the

casino, personally.”

“Oh, do you mean that you would have brought in a bigger profit?”

“Yes, I’m sure of that.”

“...You *really* sound like a sore loser, Ms. Carlotta,” Melvi said with a wry smile.

Her face blank, Carlotta said, “I’ll give you the same warning I gave you before.”

“...”

“Get a little greedy, for your own sake. An arbiter without his own desires isn’t suited for the gambling tables *or* the Mafia.”

Her message conveyed, the former top dealer departed. Melvi snorted as he watched her go.

“Desires? What nonsense.”

Though it’s true that I’m not suited to be a dealer or a Mafioso.

I am suited for the heights that Szilard Quates reached.

Oh yes, I have my own desires.

I want to make anyone who stands in my way—and especially Firo Prochainezo—taste despair.

Melvi reconfirmed the black hatred that was seeped into the depths of his being— Almost as if trying to convince himself that that hatred was his own desire.



Ennis, who had been abducted by Melvi’s men and was now held captive, reanalyzed her situation to the best of her abilities.

She had been blindfolded when they moved her out of a New York warehouse, but she did understand her situation to a certain extent.

The room she was in may have resembled a hotel room, but based on the occasional gentle wavering of the floor, she was most likely at sea, on a ship of medium size.

In their previous, one-sided discussions, Melvi had told her that he intended to bring everything to an end at the casino party. If that homunculus intended to finish things with Firo, then at that time, he would not be here.

He had threatened that if she made any attempt to escape, the people who had been abducted with her would die. Was that true? If so, wouldn't he have wanted to keep her somewhere that news of her escape could reach him easily?

She had her doubts, but without being certain, she couldn't move carelessly.

But, Ennis thought.

Could she really just sit here and do nothing?

Could she afford to let herself fill the role of a captive puppet?

Could she continue to trouble Firo and Czes and everyone in the Martillos that way?

Ennis never would have had such thoughts back when she was still working under Szilard. She simply would have been useless; Szilard would have discarded her.

But it wasn't like that anymore.

The man known as Firo Prochainezo—though he was in an underworld organization—was very kind.

Ennis hadn't realized that he was kinder to her than he was to others. All she knew was that the way he had taken her in when she had nowhere else to go had been carved into her heart and become her cornerstone.

Why was Firo so kind? It must have been because he was strong.

And not just him, but all of the Martillos, and Isaac and Miria and everyone else—they had all accepted the existence of someone like her.

That acceptance could only be rooted in strength.

And that could only mean one thing to Ennis.

Their generosity in accepting people lay not in bowing to those around them, but in drawing others into their fold while acting according to their own whims.

The people who surrounded Ennis had the strength that allowed them to do that.

Ennis couldn't let that strength be harmed through her own weakness of will.

That was why she resolved to do everything that she could.

It was a very straightforward resolution.

And to carry it out, she would use all the “knowledge” she had been avoiding so far— The knowledge she had received from Szilard Quates, gathered at the expense of others’ lives.



Somewhere in New York A Runorata Villa

Huey Laforet, who had recently escaped from prison, was currently spending his days as a guest at one of the Runorata villas.

But, given that his escape was being covered up, Victor’s men had no excuse to go barging in, and the machinations of the state were reduced to monitoring the mansion from a distance.

In one room of the villa, Salomé Carpenter—Huey’s subordinate and the director of “Rhythm,” which was in charge of research and development—continued his passionate speech.

“Exactly! That which we call knowledge is certainly valuable. However, I am against relying too heavily on the knowledge of Immortals such as yourself, Huey, sir.”

“Why is that?” Huey asked with a gentle expression.

Salomé flushed as he continued. “Knowledge is important to advancement. But the older information is, the more mistakes arise in it—or even if it was

right to begin with, it may not be the most efficient method for solving a problem. There have even been instances of old information slowing the progress of new discoveries.”

“Considering your preference for experimentation over logic, I’m not surprised you feel that way.”

“What are you talking about, sir? No one prioritizes their experiments as highly as you do. That is precisely why I am so curious about the results of the experiment you’re working on now! For the sake of that experiment, I will gladly see my darling, darling children... the Larvae that Rhythm developed... used up and crushed!”

“If you treat your lab materials like you own them, you will find yourself betrayed, you know,” Huey said with a chuckle, lifting the tea on the table in front of him to his lips.

“Ha ha ha, what a thing to hear from you, a man who sees the whole world as his guinea pig!”

“The order was reversed, for me.”

“?”

“...I was betrayed long ago by the world before my eyes and my own clumsy ideals. That is likely why I came to view my own life as a tool in one grand experiment. And that includes everything I see before me.”

Huey stared into the distance with a smile, but Salomé couldn’t begin to guess what emotion might lurk in its depths.

He realized, though, that to press Huey further would be **overstepping his bounds** and instead changed the subject away from Huey’s past.

“Come to think of it... You met with Firo Prochainezo yesterday, didn’t you? What did you two discuss?”

“Simply some idle chatter. We reminisced about Alcatraz for a bit.”

“I hear that he is the one who took your eye, so I’m surprised there wasn’t any fuss.”

“Oh, I don’t bear him any grudge.”

But Salomé sighed lightly at Huey's words. "I mean from young Miss Liza. I was worried she might go mad with anger and bring a flock of her birds over."

"There's no need to worry yourself on that front. Liza isn't angry."

"She's not?"

"No, it seems that it has come time for her first love. She's considerably younger than her sister Chané was, but I suppose it may be a result of sharing her consciousness with so many older women... Or perhaps..."

As Huey shifted into theorizing to himself, Salomé's eyes opened wide with shock.

"Wh... Wait just one moment! Miss Liza is in love?! With Firo Prochainezo?!"

"Ahaha, careful, Salomé. If you are loud enough for someone to overhear, Liza might get angry at you."

"I—er—I apologize. But... I thought Miss Liza desired nothing but to be acknowledged by you... I was surprised when I heard that Miss Chané had a sweetheart, too, but when I actually met the man in question, it began to make sense."

Their conversation was interrupted by a knock on the door.

And the one to enter the room was none other than the man Salomé had just mentioned—Claire Stanfield, the hitman who had taken the name of the famed "handyman," Felix.

"Good morning, Father!"

"Haha... Don't you think it's a little early to begin calling me 'Father'? Melvi will be going all-out tomorrow night, so please make sure you protect him until then."

"Of course, sir! But since he isn't here yet, may I go out for a bit?"

"Do you have business elsewhere?"

Claire was making a rather willful request for a bodyguard, but Huey didn't seem to mind; he simply asked after Claire's intentions with genuine curiosity in his voice.

"Yes, it seems that a bear I know, Cookie... sorry, 'Charkie' has escaped, so I'd like to look for him."

It was Salomé, not Huey, who responded to Claire's words.

"Oho... Would you be referring to that giant bear?"

"Hm? Yeah, but he's not four meters tall or anything so I don't know if I'd call him giant."

There had never, in the entire recorded history of Earth, been a bear larger than four meters; but Claire wasn't familiar with many bears other than the three-meter-tall Cookie, so he assumed that Cookie's huge size was normal.

Not bothering to correct his misconception, Salomé turned to Huey.

"Sir, I would like to participate in this bear hunt as well."

"We're not hunting. It's a rescue mission."

"Oh, I beg your pardon."

Salomé apologized easily in response to Claire's correction, then asked Huey, "May I? We may be able to earn a debt of gratitude from the Runoratas... and there's something I'd like to try."



Thirty minutes later Somewhere in New York A main street

"Hey, Nader. I heard you were at Ra's Lance last night too, 'zat true?"

"Uh, yeah... I'm acting as a standin for a local moneybag."

A main street near Little Italy.

Shaft had driven Nader to a main street near Little Italy and then parked his car. Ladd, Graham, and several people who were apparently their followers loitered around the car.

When Ladd called out to him in a friendly voice, Nader had answered with a polite smile. But he still wasn't over the shock and worry of everything he'd learned about his friend Sonja, so it wasn't a very convincing one.

"You don't look so good, pal. You lose it all?"

"I was just checking the place out yesterday. I didn't win or lose anything."

"Hah! That's good and cautious of you. Me, I was basically wandering around outside the building and playing security. I hardly stepped into the casino rooms at all. Didn't see who I was looking for, either, so I was bored out of my skull," Ladd said with a shrug.

In response, Graham, who had at some point climbed onto the roof of Shaft's car, spoke.

"Boss Ladd... I have... a sad story for you."

"Oh? What's up, Graham?"

"They say that life should be reliable. But in reality, no matter how hard you work, your chances of being rewarded fairly are low. And if there are chances, it's a gamble. No! Who's ever heard of a reliable gamble?! The chips always fall where they may, and you can't see what your odds are. But they say you can find skilled gamblers in the Orient who can win a castle and a bride with only a single dried stalk of rice!"

Graham burst into one of his usual monologues without warning. Nader, who wasn't used to such things, looked unnerved, but Shaft's face remained tranquil.

"Don't worry, you don't have to pay attention to these."

Whether Graham had heard that little exchange or not, he began to roll around on the roof of the car as he continued.

"Who cares about reliability! America is a country built by pioneers! What happened to the good old frontier spirit?! ...But some people say those are just the ideas of people who came here from somewhere else and get angry and then other people say that isn't true and they start arguing about races and colonization and it all gets really complicated so I'm going to stop thinking there, but that means I'm losing without even making my argument, which is tragic."

Having fallen as deep into depression as he could, Graham sprawled limply

across the roof of the car. But his frail voice continued.

"It's too late... The whole world is one big gamble, and the bookie a.k.a. the Earth is working humanity over for all we're worth. This world is darkness. It's darkness, because half of it is night! Even if humanity's greatest pioneers someday chop down all the forests for farmland and mine all the land and take over the sky, it will only be a temporary victory. Someday we'll lose big and the Earth will exploit us one more... Could it be that I'm just the first member of humanity to be exploited by the Earth?"

"Don't worry about it. All you gotta do is punch the bookie's lights out and take back what you lost."

"What?! Boss Ladd, are you saying I should punch the Earth?!"

"Easy stuff, right? 'Cause it doesn't move. You just build yourself a little mountain in a sandbox, take a seat, and smack it around as much as you want."

As Graham got depressed by his own nonsense, Ladd answered with even worse nonsense.

Wondering what he'd gotten himself into, Nader turned wide eyes towards Shaft, but his advice was the same as before: with a completely blank face, he muttered, "Just don't pay attention."

"Heh... That's Boss Ladd for you... In the stormy ups and downs of life, they say that this world is a gamble completely up to luck, but Boss Ladd has figured out a reliable way to punch it that has nothing to do with luck at all! I can learn from him! That's it! Life is fun! Because you can advance towards your dreams one reliable step at a time! This is *revolutionary*, Shaft! If I could beat the Earth, then beating the Runorata Family will be no sweat! Right?!"

"Well, obviously. Everyone but you figured that out already, Graham."

"Really?! The world has left me behind... If life is one big gamble, then that means I haven't even stepped up to the table yet. Which means that anything I've lost so far doesn't count! I haven't won yet, but I haven't lost yet either! The world stretches out before my eyes! Could this be my frontier spirit?!"

"You bet! So make sure you do a reliable job of exploring it... by smashing it to bits!"

As Graham's high-energy voice rang through the streets, Ladd just took it in stride. Lua, the woman in the back seat of the car, only smiled lightly, and Nader had no clue what she was thinking.

In any case, Nader was aware that they were all pretty conspicuous, so after checking his surroundings for suspicious women or birds, he turned to Ladd with a question.

"Um, what was it you wanted from me?"

"Right, so, you're gonna be at the casino party again tonight, right? As a standin? I got something I want you to do."

"What is it?"

"Nothing to worry about, it's just the same thing as the other day," Ladd said, handing over a black bag.

"?"

Nader felt the weight of the bag as he took it. With a bad feeling, he opened it up and peeked inside.

And he found exactly what he'd feared: the bag was full to the brim with dollar bills. A chill ran down his back.

"That's your war chest. I don't care whether you win or lose. I just want you to take it and cause a big stink at the Runorata Family's tables."

"Wait, when you say 'cause a big stink'... you don't want me to start a fight, do you?"

"Course not. I want you to do this so *I* can start a fight."

"I'm not following," Nader protested with a grimace.

Ladd's eyes shone as he answered. "It's pretty straightforward. I just want you to leave an impression as someone with a lot of money to throw around. Catch the Runoratas' eyes. Whether that's as a talented gambler who's raking in the dough or as an idiot who manages to lose a shitton of money in one day, I don't care."

"But what do you get out of that?"

"Oh, don't worry, I'm not gonna cause any trouble for the person you're standing in for. But when people come after you to find out why you're standing out so much, I want you to start spreading some rumors."

"Tell 'em, 'I found myself a treasure aboard the Flying Pussyfoot.'"

"...What?"

His mind went blank for a second, and then—

Hang on a second, why is that train coming up again?

Did I tell this guy about it?

Or did this Shaft guy say something? He seems to know a lot.

What's this about a treasure? I never even got on that train!

"You know, the Flying Pussyfoot. I'm not talking about a ship, here. It's a transcontinental express train. If you can't remember it, better write it down."

"Y-yeah, okay."

Wait, so he doesn't know I was involved?

Come to think of it, I told Ladd that Placido Russo was after me, but I don't think I told him the details... or did I? Dammit, too much has happened these past few days. I can't remember how much I've told different people about myself.

The only thing he could be sure of was that he'd just come clean about his whole life story to Pamela, the woman who knew his friend Sonja. And those kids Czes and Rail had been listening, but Nader had no idea how they were connected to any of this.

There was a possibility that he could wake up the next morning and all of New York would have heard of him, but since Hilton and Chané had already locked on to him, from there it didn't really matter what kind of rumors might spread.

Hang on though, there's still something I don't get... How is that flock of birds supposed to be part of Hilton or Liza or whatever their name is?

I mean... every Hilton who's found me so far has had a different face and a different age anyway, so I guess there could be birds involved...

Almost as though the back-and-forth of cars along the street had convinced Nader that this was reality, not a dream, he finally realized how strange the story Rail and Czes had told him about the birds was.

Compared to that, the pure fact of how dangerous Ladd and Graham were felt much more realistic to Nader—but then he remembered just how strong they were and decided not to think any harder about that.

“...Then what?”

“When those rumors start reaching the right ears, I bet people will want to keep an eye on you. You’ll probably be followed on your way out, or someone might even pick a fight with you.”

“That’s bad! There’s nothing good about this plan!”

“Sure there is! I get to take whoever picks a fight with you and slaughter ‘em or blow ‘em away or knock ‘em down, which is gonna put me in a really good mood. Plus if we get some dirt out of it, that’ll be good the bunch I’m working for, the Gandors, and if some Mafia thugs disappear, that’ll be good news for New York. C’mon, everyone’s gonna be happy, it’s great!”

As Ladd whacked his shoulder, Nader asked timidly, “...What am I supposed to get out of it?”

“You get that money. If you lose it all, at least it ain’t your money, and if you win, you’ll be loads richer. You can get through the night without using any of your boss’s money, which means you’ll be able to tell ‘em you broke even. C’mon, it’s great!”

Ladd whacked his back even harder. Nader tried to find the words to turn him down, but all of a sudden the direction of his thoughts changed.

Wait, could this work?

I’m being watched alright, by a bunch of different groups.

Apparently the BOI, too.

Supposing there’s a really big mess...

Could I... catch Manfred Beriam's eye, too?

That whiff of hope felt like stepping out onto thin ice.

According to what Pamela had said, Senator Beriam had an eye on the casino party.

If a punk like him wanted to catch the senator's attention, all he'd have to do is wait for something huge to happen and put himself in the middle of it.

"No... hang on just a damn second..."

Nader's thoughts leaked unwittingly from his mouth.

"Hm? What's up?" Ladd asked.

Nader gasped and looked from side to side and smoothed things over with a, "Er, sorry... Talking to myself. Let me think about it for a minute."

"Don't take too long! I have to go pick on Who and say hi to that doctor next. Come to think of it, I met that gray-wearing doctor on the Flying Pussyfoot, too..."

Realizing that Ladd was talking to Graham and Shaft more than to him, Nader pretended he was thinking over whether or not to accept this job from Ladd while instead turning his thoughts further into the future.

Come on, this is just weird.

Why am I thinking about something like that?

Why would I want a senator to pay attention to me? I don't even have any kind of cards to negotiate with.

I mean, until yesterday, I wasn't thinking about anything but escaping.

Despite how flustered he felt, he couldn't get his thoughts to return to their previous direction.

Nader Schasscule.

No matter how hard he tried to convince himself, this lowlife was eternally unable to take "the first step."

He was aware how narrowly he'd escaped death all those years ago; that he'd been saved someone's goodwill and just barely made it into a life that he no longer had to drench with evil. But he couldn't move any further than that.

If he wasn't going to be evil, what should he do? He kept thinking it over as he got drawn into the eddies of the commotion in New York and narrowly escaped death at Chané's hands once again, but even then, he still was able to think of nothing but escaping.

He was aware of that.

But if he was so aware of that, why was he thinking about *this* now?

Unable to discern his own heart, Nader kept turning the thoughts over in his mind.

I sold the Lemures out.

I don't know if that contributed to saving his family or what.

But if he goes through the BOI to investigate me, he'll at least find out that I betrayed the Lemures, right?

If someone came to talk to him on Beriam's behalf, what should he say?

What could he do to dig his way into Beriam's organization?

What could he do to get his hands on information that might be useful to them?

What could he do to get a look at the machinations behind this casino party?

What could he do? What could he do? What could he do?

The same phrase kept repeating over and over in Nader's head.

But in the end, all of that was about the process.

He himself knew what desire lay at the far end of all of these questions about what he should do.

From the moment he'd met Pamela and learned who was in this city—he had been trapped by his own faults.

What can I do to keep my promise to Sonja?

What can I do... to see her again, fair and square?

And as soon as he admitted that to himself, he figured it out.

He understood why he was so desperate to meet this girl—not even his girlfriend, just a childhood friend.

Oh, I get it.

I'm gonna die, aren't I?

Yeah, I'm gonna be killed. Any way you look at it.

He felt a heavy weight settle onto his shoulders, but at the same time, that weight finally dragged his head out of the clouds and his feet back to earth.

The fate that he'd been denying, that he'd been trying so hard to escape from—he must have accepted it in the last twelve hours.

He was in Chané's sights; he'd been attacked by Hilton as a flock of birds; he'd been spotted at the casino; he was getting involved with thugs like Ladd and Graham; he was participating in a casino party that all the local Mafia were involved in.

And on top of that, now that he'd remembered this promise to his friend, some fishy politician was trying to have that very same friend shoot someone.

But it was that last item that mattered to Nader more than anything else.

No matter how much he fought it, he wasn't likely to clear the thick fog of death away from himself.

He may have been able to escape New York and live alone.

If he could just forget about the one promise he'd made himself—the promise that made him what he was—he may have been able to extend his life a little.

But for how long? A day? Three days? Five days?

How long can I really get away from Hilton and Chané?

How long can I escape from that monster Huey?

"Hey."

Nader had turned and spoken to Ladd before he realized it.

"What's up? You want the money?"

"No... There's something I want to know before I go all-in. Back when you met me... You took one look at me and said that I was a coward terrified of my own death."

"Yup. You still are."

"...What do you think I can do to forget about death? How can I stop being afraid of it?"

The man in front of him right now was the strongest person Nader had ever seen.

He might've even been able to take down Chané in a one-on-one fight.

After spending his life infiltrating various organizations, the ability to sense power in people was one of Nader's few talents, and he was pretty confident in his ability to assess strong people.

What could he do to become someone like that? Nader decided to ask that question for the first time—but his phrasing was so roundabout that the answer he got was too blunt.

"Easy. Just die."

"..."

"See, I love beating the shit out of anyone who doesn't realize they could die at any moment. It's my way of telling 'em, 'You could die in an accident at any second. And guess what? Crossing my path was that accident.' If you ever forget how easily you could die, don't worry. Just come to me and I'll kill you so that you remember."

Nader realized he'd picked the wrong person to ask his question to, but he couldn't help digging a little deeper.

"Do you hate the kind of hero who isn't afraid to die, then?"

But Ladd gave a long sigh, shaking his head.

"You've got it all wrong. Listen, 'not being afraid to die' and 'not thinking you're gonna die' are two *completely* different things! Most of the bastards thinking they won't die are just trying to get away from it. They're just trying not to think about it. But when you're not scared of dying, that means you've accepted you're gonna die but still keep on fighting. It's boring to kill guys like that. That's all I mean."

Somehow, the subject had changed to "what makes someone fun or boring to kill." Ladd continued in that vein.

"The last ones standing are generally the cowards. People who take one look at me and sprint off in the other direction, or bastards who don't come near me in the first place."

"...What if one of those cowards wants to change something? What could he do? Like if he wanted to save someone even though he was a coward, or if he wanted to be a hero. What kind of advice would you give him?"

"Now there's a question. Someone like you or Who, becoming a hero? I would say it's totally impossible... but now I'm curious. Whatcha think, Graham?"

Before Nader could stop him, Ladd had sought the opinion of someone even more unsuitable for conversation.

"How sad... Let me tell you a sad story. A coward turning into a hero...? Is that allowed? What if Martians invaded Earth, and while the courageous were challenging them to battle, there were some cowards screeching 'Eeek, scary! I don't want to die! Dear God, please save me, help meeeee!'... Could someone like that be called a hero? No, they could not! And humanity cannot defeat the Martians... So by running away, the coward only prolongs their own suffering! Tragic... what a tragic story! The Earth is done for!"

You know what? "Unsuitable" doesn't even begin to cover it.

Chané and Ladd may have had the most mental screws loose out of everyone Nader had ever met, but this Graham fellow had the most *verbal* screws loose by far.

Considering how much he liked swinging that giant wrench around, he was probably funny in the head, too, but it was hard to judge whether he was clever or an idiot from the words he strung together.

Just when Nader was trying to figure out how to drag the machine-gun pace of Graham's conversation back to something more normal, the back window of Shaft's car opened.

It was Lua Klein, Ladd's girlfriend, who stuck her head out the window and found the perfect moment to interject her own opinion into the space between Graham's monologues.

"No, the Earth isn't finished yet, Graham."

"Miss Lua?!"

Graham admired Lua—both as the fiancée of his "big brother" Ladd and as a superbly calm woman.

She rarely spoke up when Graham was talking, but when she did, her words were always clever and managed to change the direction of the conversation—so in that way, Graham was no match for her.

"The Earth still has a chance?!"

"If a coward manages to stand up to his own fear and pain and survive until the very end... won't that make him the last man on Earth? As long as he stays human until the very end and fights back against the Martians just by being alive, that's amazing all on its own, isn't it?"

"What?!"

As Graham gaped at her, Lua gave a gentle smile and continued to explain her logic.

"Even all alone, he would keep proving with his very life that humanity hasn't fallen yet until the moment he dies. There would be no one to write down his story or praise him, but... I would consider that person a hero."

"Man, Lua's such a pessimist but she always finds a way forward. Isn't she brilliant? Huh?" Ladd asked Nader in a fond aside.

Nader could only answer, "Uh, yeah... sure."

On the other hand, Graham raised his voice in a sudden excited shout.

"Oh... ohhhhhh man! This is fun! Let me tell you a fun story! The Earth is saved! It's all two sides of the same coin, an infinite variety of different thoughts from different people! This man, who everyone called a coward, who has done nothing but run away from the Martians... change how you look at things just a little and he's a hero! Three cheers for heroes! The Earth is ours! What a hero! He saves everyone and we live happily ever after! Three cheers for humanity!"

"...If he's the last man on Earth, who exactly is he saving?"

Shaft offered a counterargument reflexively, but Graham just gestured sharply with his wrench and answered, his voice overflowing with confidence, "The last woman on Earth, obviously! And he can save the Martians, too! Today's enemy is tomorrow's friend!"

Shaft was about to argue back, but he noticed Nader sitting in silence next to him and did his best to toss him a lifeline.

"..."

"Really, you don't have to pay attention to any of this."

But in fact, Nader was thinking quite deeply about Lua and Graham's words as he sat in silence.

Change... how you look at things, huh?

Or, to put it another way... what if you make people around you change how they look at things?

Could he do that?

Nader had his doubts, but he knew that he wasn't in a situation where he could just sit around figuring out his own capabilities.

I'm a con man.

I can't change my colors now.

So... I'm just gonna have to use that.

Not to survive.

If I could just save her, it would be enough.

If I could just trick her into believing that heroes still exist... that would be enough.

The time of Nader's metamorphosis was here.

That's it. That's all I need.

I'll fool them all. I'll make them think I'm someone to be reckoned with.

He was changing into not a butterfly, but a moth drawn in by hope.

Could a moth, a creature of the night, dream that it was a butterfly?

Before he could search for that answer, Nader made a quiet decision.

He wasn't sure how to feel about the fact that the crazy words of a wrench-wielding man had been what had finally pushed him out of the paralysis that hearing Sonja's name had inflicted on him, but he had to smile; in a way, it suited the way he'd stepped into this crazy situation.

First I guess I have to fool myself.

The lowlife took a deep breath.

And he remembered his past self—the furthest away from a hero he'd ever been.

He remembered the version of himself who had begun climbing the stairs to success, before the man named Huey had driven him insane.

By the time he exhaled, his lowlife self was gone. In his place stood someone with the eyes of a con man.

“Hm...?”

A moment of uncertainty flickered across Ladd’s face.

The man known as Nader was still afraid, but for just a moment, he’d seemed like someone else.

“You still in there, Nader?”

“...Yes.”

Nader’s next words blew Ladd’s doubts away, replacing them with delight.

“I understand. I’ll take this money.

“I’ll see you tonight... after the party.”

1935-D Luckstreet Boys, Chapter 27: There's No Way No One Will Interfere

"Hey, hey, hey, this is a problem, me."

"It certainly is troublesome, I."

The twin bodyguards' search for the bear had led them to a certain clinic in a corner of New York.

They'd heard rumors of there being a bear in a hospital somewhere and come here to find a crowd of rubberneckers and a handful of men in suits guarding the gates to the clinic in question.

"By the looks of 'em, I'd say those are police officers, wouldn't you?"

"Yes, and moreover, they look skilled. They may even be with the BOI."

They made their way through the crowd to try to look inside, but then something new appeared on the scene.

A handful of men and women appeared from the car parked on the shoulder of the road.

"...Hey, me. I'm getting a bad feeling from that bunch."

"I agree, I. If I remember correctly, that man with the wrench is one of the men whose photographs we were shown when they told us who to be careful of in New York."

"Hey now, what's going on? There's quite a fuss going on at Who's work. Someone die or something?"

Expressing surprise at all the people gathered in front of the clinic that, until yesterday, had been nearly deserted, Ladd forced his way through the crowd of

onlookers.

"How sad... Let me tell you a sad story. A mysterious crowd of people blocks our way... Greeted by a today that is so different from yesterday, my very soul! It overflows with confusion! What can we do? How can we bring back our ordinary, everyday life?! Who has taken my everyday life from me?! Was it Martians? Venusians? Or could it be that people from this very same planet are once more trying to do battle with me?!"

"Um, Graham? Hello? Graham?"

Nader had left to get ready for the casino party, so Ladd, Graham, Lua, and Shaft had headed towards the hospital where their friend worked.

Graham followed Ladd through the crowd of people, oblivious to their stares as he swung his wrench around. The onlookers suddenly realized that this bunch was trouble and gave them a wide berth.

But the men standing guard in front of the clinic showed no signs of fleeing; instead, they turned wary eyes towards Ladd and Graham.

"Those look like police officers to me," Shaft pointed out, but Ladd continued to walk forward without a care. Ignoring the men stationed at the entrance completely, he tried to enter.

"Stop right there. The clinic is closed for today."

"Oh, come on now. Do my friends and I look like we're sick?"

In a way, he and Graham could certainly be considered sick, and Lua's face always had a sickly color to it, but Ladd ignored both those facts and demanded, "Let us in. We're involved."

"Hey!"

The guards rushed to stop them, but then a voice rang out from inside the clinic.

"Oh! Is that Ladd?! Hey, come look at this! It's crazy!"

It was immediately followed by, "Hey, don't just go inviting outsiders into... huh? Ladd?" but even as Ladd tilted his head, he smirked at the guards.

"Look at that, they're calling for me. Guess I'd better head in."

He shook off the guards when they tried to stop him and went inside. What greeted him was a sight far beyond what he could have imagined: A giant grizzly bear, over three meters tall—and next to it stood Isaac and Miria, who were worked up about something or other.

"...GRRRR..."

The bear growled, but there was no aggression in it, and considering that it made no effort to shake off Isaac and Miria as they petted its fur, it was clear that it was pretty used to humans.

"The hell? When did this place turn into a vet?"

"Hmm... Well, I could treat him, but animals aren't my field."

Ladd turned towards the voice to see the doctor, Who's boss.

"Hello there, Mr. Gray Magician. I wanted to come say thank you for looking after Lua and Who on the train, but what's going on here?"

"Just a little lost bear. It sounds like some Mafioso or other was looking after him until he escaped, and the smell of the jerky we use in stew drew him here."

"Wow, the world is a scary place. Where's Who? Did the bear get him?"

Ladd spoke unconcernedly, only for the door to open and the man in question to emerge from further into the clinic.

"If I'd been eaten, would you have avenged me?"

"Dunno. I have no idea how bears feel about their own mortality."

"That's what matters to you, huh?" Who sighed, sending a scornful glance Ladd's way. But Ladd only glanced coolly back and then returned his gaze to the thing that had first caught his eye: the giant bear.

Rubbing the bear's soft fur, Isaac said, "You've got bad timing. Firo was here a little while ago, but he left to go to work just before you showed up."

"He was all businesslike! Time is money! It's the gold rush era!"

Hearing their chatter, Ladd realized he'd missed his chance to ask Firo about Melvi and shrugged. Then his gaze slid in a different direction— To the uptight-

looking man who'd been glaring daggers at him from behind his glasses ever since he'd come in.

"So, who's this guy making a face like he makes a habit of griping to all the local drunks* about how hard his job is?"

"Oh, um... that's Victor! He's the one who brought me to Alcatraz!"

"Don't tell him *that*. And it's not like drunks care what people are talking about anyway!"

The man introduced as Victor cut Isaac off and took a step closer to Ladd.

"...You're Ladd Russo, aren't you? Not sure I like seeing the Russo Family's top hitman strutting around in the light of day like this. Makes me wonder about my job security."

"Oh, I see. You're with the BOI, aincha? Oh, but let's get this straight, I'm a freelancer now. Nothing I could get up to has a damn thing to do with the Russo Family, got it?"

"Hmph... Ricardo Russo, huh... Well, the Russos won't be able to do much no matter what they try. I care more about what *you* think you're up to here in New York."

"Ooh, I'm flattered. Are you one of my fans? That brings us to a problem, though, because you seem to be reeking with the scent of exactly the kind of human I hate." Ladd narrowed his eyes and rubbed his false hand with his real one. "You're so relaxed, even in a situation like this. You're looking at that gigantic bear, and you're looking straight into the eyes of a hitman fresh outta prison, and you don't care. ...Don't tell me you think you're never gonna die?"

Victor briefly scowled at those words, but then his face relaxed again. In a voice full of irony, he asked, "So what if I do?"

"So what, indeed. That gray magician... the doctor working here... I owe him one, see, so I can't exactly leave him a corpse to deal with."

"Good call. Even if it comes off sounding like you're chicken."

Victor's response was a blatant challenge.

And Ladd seemed to realize that, because he put a hand on Victor's shoulder

with a warm smile.

"But you know, I think I may be able to pay back what I owe."

"What now?"

"Well, a hospital makes money when it's got injured people to look after, doesn't it? I'm thinking something that'll take about thirty years to heal, how's that sound?"

"The fuck do you mean 'how does that sound'?! Do you think I'm gonna feel threatened by a sadistic freak of a hitman without any ideals or self-respect or even a decent business sense like you? Don't underestimate me, you brat. Your petty little violence can't do shit against people who have the nation's strength at our backs. While you're off killing one or two saps, we're looking after millions of people! Why don't you get it through your thick skull that you've only got power over what you can reach with your hands or your own gun, you imbecile!"

As a vein in Victor's forehead began pulsing, his subordinate spoke up from next to him.

"Ah... Agent Talbot, treating the nation's strength as your own personal shield makes you sound like a dirty cop."

"Shut up! Just throw these fuckers out already!"

But as soon as Victor looked over at his subordinate, Ladd wound his right fist back.

At the same time, Isaac tried to step in.

"Hey, guys, there's no need to..."

But he didn't get to finish his sentence—

Because the bear who had been sitting quiet until then all of a sudden stood up.

"...!! Shit!"

Victor hadn't expected this.

It had been one thing when Firo had demanded that he “look after this bear” and another thing when he’d actually seen the thing’s size; then, when he’d heard that it belonged to the Runorata Family, he’d decided to use it as a bargaining chip of some sort. But now— Just when they’d started preparations to move the bear back to the BOI offices, Ladd Russo—one of the people they were supposed to be surveilling—showed up.

At least he didn’t seem to be stupid enough to actually hit the bear. Bolstered by that relief, Victor had tried to provoke him into violence to craft a reason to arrest him, but for some reason, it was the bear that started to move first.

Come on, what the hell? Why’s it standing up all of a sudden?

It had been so well-behaved up until this point—had it sensed some kind of change in the atmosphere?

Victor honed his senses to figure out what might have changed—

But it turned out that he didn’t need to hone his senses to figure it out at all.

“...?”

Ladd and Isaac had noticed the change, too; with puzzled faces, they looked around, trying to find its source.

“...What’s that noise? Where is it coming from?”

What they heard was a creepy, artificial-sounding groaning noise.



At the same time In the Martillos’ underground casino

“...Oh, I get it.”

The illegal casino was completely empty of customers.

With the scars of Ladd’s destruction still fresh on the equipment around him, Firo was taking a few of the slot machines apart.

He'd also dismantled another machine of the same type—a newer one which they hadn't yet finished putting together—alongside it and had all the pieces spread out across the floor.

And, after examining each and every piece so closely that he felt dizzy, Firo was sure of one thing.

The other day, all the slot machines had randomly and inexplicably hit on triple sevens at the same time. If that were to happen during normal business hours, in front of their customers, people would suspect foul play and never come by this casino again.

Or even worse, if it were to happen in the middle of the casino party, it could earn the animosity of the Runorata Family or the other organizations. As an unaffiliated outfit protecting their own territory, Firo and the Martillo Family were prepared to face a certain amount of antagonism from those around them. But Firo was absolutely *not* willing to be dragged into that antagonism by Melvi Dormentaire's scheming.

So Firo wanted to come up with a counterstrategy as fast as possible, but just then—“What’s up, Firo? What do you get? Now that you’re surrounded by all those gears and screws and that manmade sort of nonsense, could it be that you’ve realized Mother Nature’s worth?”

His red eyes shining, Christopher Shouldered—who was attending the casino party as a bodyguard—peeked over Firo’s shoulder. His employer, Ricardo, was there with him, and she—although Firo still believed her to be a “he”—also seemed to be interested in what Firo was doing; she looked over his work from beside Christopher.

“That guy’s no wizard. He’s just a cheap illusionist... no, that would be an insult to illusionists.”

Firo shrugged with a wry smile on his face and offered the conclusion he’d reached.

“Melvi Dormentaire is nothing but a cheater.”

“Ohh, he’s the one you’re finishing things with tomorrow, right? The one who was with that redhead the first time I came here...”

"Yeah, that's the one."

"So what is it? What kind of trick did Mel-Mel have up his sleeve?"
Christopher pressed, looking intrigued.

Firo started to answer, "It's less a fancy trick than an act of brute force. He just... hm?"

Mid-sentence, he stopped.

"Do you... hear something?"

"...Yeah, I do. I think it's coming from outside."

A strange sound—somehow a combination of a groan and a ringing bell—penetrated the basement casino.

It must've been pretty loud outside.

Firo tilted his head, wondering if it was some kind of siren, but Christopher's mouth fell open.

"Wait... haven't... haven't I heard this before?"

And, with a little thought, Christopher found the answer in his memories.

"Oh! This is the noise Salomé makes!"

"Salomé?"

"He's one of Huey Laforet's subordinates..."

"He's the weirdo who made all the washed-up homunculi like Adele and me."



Central Park.

This place of rest in the middle of Manhattan already had a proud history stretching back over 120 years.

At just over three square kilometers in size, the park was home to a variety of plant life and formed a verdant oasis between the towering skyscrapers. Ever since the start of the Depression, a number of people who'd lost their jobs or their homes had treated it as a place to live, and public perception of the park

had fallen until the government had cracked down on them. But by now, public order was on the verge of being restored.

However, at present, not only the homeless but the park's regular visitors, too, were nowhere to be seen.

The reason for that was the odd group gathered in the area, and the strange, groaning sound ringing from the center of the group.

And in addition to the strange noise, one man burst forth with an even stranger host of words.

"Ohh... Is this rumbling at my earlobes the wrath of the gods, or the hubris of man?

Wherefore doth the progress of civilization reshape the formless entrails of the atmosphere, thereby encouraging its own existence?

It falls short! Still it falls short; I shall not acknowledge this quickening that shakes my skull, this birthing cry that threatens to devour my soul...

Repairing the torn seams of deception, this body becomes a placenta and nurtures a new desire!

The infant named desire is born now from my mouth!

It can only unleash its birthing cry!

Oh, newborn world, come!

Thou must intertwine with quietude, with silence, and dance!

Drown out the heartbeat of the world and stop time for all of creation! ...
bggaaghh!"

The one who had spoken the words cut off abruptly by a strange scream was a man with a thick beard and a fedora pulled low over his eyes. His companions called him "The Poet."

Sickle, a beautiful woman with long blonde hair and a cold gaze, had made him scream with a roundhouse kick.

"...Why the hell do you have to go on and on like that when you're just trying

to tell that noise to shut up?"

Sickle spoke roughly, but the Poet responded in his usual roundabout way as he got waveringly to his feet.

"The victors always shroud the age in falsity, and the losers are left to record history.

When blessed, my flesh is reborn; but love and hate leave unseen scars carved into my history.

Destruction only calls forth more destruction, eventually blotting out the sun.

The scars left on the shattered souls of the losers carve history into the heavens.

Such scars eventually turn to whirlpools of lamentation in muddy waters and wash away the era of the victors!

O ye victors who sing the praises of the age, you shall learn fear! You shall learn to tremble!

Laid low by the rain of your own lies and deception, you shall suffer and struggle under the weight of the losers' cheerghguhh..."

"Let me guess, you mean 'I'm against violence, remember that'? Well, I tried to tell you to stop plenty of times before I let my foot say it for me, so that's what you get."

As Sickle and the Poet carried out their usual exchange, the sound continued to ring through the air.

And it was Salomé, wearing a strange machine that resembled a speaker, who seemed to be at the noise's center.

"Honestly... *this* is why Master Salomé called us out here all of a sudden? What's he doing?" the man whose arms were wrapped in bandages—Hong Chi Mei, or Chi for short—asked.

Sickle answered, "Apparently he's trying to attract a bear."

"A bear? In the middle of the city?"

Chi wondered if Salomé had gone crazy from spending too much time on his research, but Frank, a child who was over six feet tall, said, “U-umm, I heard that the Runoratas’ pet bear escaped. And then Mr. Salomé said he’d catch the bear for them... I heard the bear is even b-bigger than me...”

“If a bear that big ends up wandering through the city, the police’ll shoot it. That’s all there is to it.”

“I think that’s why he wants to catch it first...” murmured the girl bundled into warm clothing with a knit hat pulled down over her eyes—but her comment was lost in the strange noise emanating from Salomé.

“He’s been bragging that he can control nearby animals, but I don’t know how believable that is...” answered the woman with beautiful symbols tattoos all over her body.

At present, Salomé was **wearing a speaker** that he claimed emitted a sound that lured in certain species of animals.

He wore not only the odd-looking speaker, but also the battery that served as its power source, on his back.

Such batteries were mostly used in electric automobiles, but Rhythm had taken it upon themselves to create a smaller version.

The history of electric automobiles was long, and from the time of their development in the late 18th century to the invention of gasoline-based internal combustion engines, they had spread throughout the world. By 1899, some electric cars could even go over 60 miles per hour.

A certain inventor by the name of Edison had also manufactured his own electric automobiles, and by the previous year, in 1934, even Japan was producing its own domestic electric cars. Thus the development of the battery was also progressing quickly.

Even so, the battery Salomé was wearing was one Rhythm had improved for their own sake without releasing to the general public, a new design that was meant exclusively to power the battery on his back.

Salomé had transformed some of the direct current emanating from the battery into an alternating current through a strange, complex set of circuitry of

his own design. And from that sound-amplifying machine, powered by both alternating and direct current, emerged an eerie sound that, similarly, was of Salomé's own design.

The sound could be heard from quite a distance—maybe even a few kilometers. Apparently, Salomé intended to use that sound to lure in the bear that was wandering Manhattan somewhere outside of Central Park, but Sickle and the others watched over him skeptically; as usual, Salomé's inventions were clever, but their practical application left something to be desired.

Nearly all of the Lamia were there—not just those who'd been speaking earlier, but also a man in a fancy suit, a half-naked bodybuilder with glasses, and a man in a skull mask** all stood with the rest, watching and waiting.

"Why did he call us all the way out here?!"

Tim's voice was even louder than the sound around them, but rather than shout, Adele answered by leaning in close to speak into his ear.

"I think he probably wants people to think that this is some kind of circus performance in case the bear actually does show up, so that no one panics. ... We do kind of look like a circus at first glance, after all."

"...Yeah, I guess you're right."

Glancing around at his strangely-dressed underlings, Tim sighed.

If my brother ever sees me in a place like this...

Remembering his squinty-eyed older brother who was employed as the Gandors' torture specialist, Tim nevertheless remained vigilant, keeping an eye on his surroundings.

And then, after an uneventful ten or so minutes—

It actually appeared, in the corner of Tim's vision.

The three-meter-tall bear that the Runorata Family owned.

"Holy shit, it actually came!"

But then he noticed—

That there were some hangers-on to the bear that came barreling into the park on all fours.

About ten or so minutes ago

“What’s that noise, me?”

“It seems rather similar to Cookie’s roar, I.”

Gabriel and Juliano looked at each other as they heard the noise echoing from afar.

Carefully analyzing the noise that reverberated between the skyscrapers, they guessed that it probably came from around Central Park.

Just then the door of the clinic opened and an enormous bear emerged.

A few women screamed, and the onlookers all scattered.

“Oh, there’s no mistaking it. That’s Cookie, I!”

“Looks like he’s unharmed. Let’s bring him home, me.”

They tried to approach Cookie, but then they noticed the men standing guard around the entrance begin to draw their guns, eying Cookie warily.

In that instant, they acted.

Dashing forward, Gabriel and Juliano stuck their hands into their pockets and threw a pair of throwing knives in perfect sync.

Usually Gabriel preferred knives and Juliano preferred guns, but since they didn’t want to cause too much of a scene this time, they both elected to use the throwing knives.

The knives hit the men’s guns dead on, and the men—probably BOI agents—unthinkingly dropped their weapons.

“Who the hell are you?!”

As the agents shouted at the men who’d suddenly attacked them, the twins

answered calmly.

"We work for the Runoratas. We've come to retrieve our master's friend, if you don't mind."

"Trying to shoot the young master's friend? That's pretty cruel of you."

"...! The Runoratas?!"

The men, who'd been on the verge of confusion, straightened up again.

And just as they were trying to aim their guns again, the bear pushed its way through the gate.

The BOI agents weren't sure whether to aim their guns at the Runoratas or the bear.

But then a new source of confusion appeared.

"How fun... let me tell you a fun story. Yahoo! It's a bear! Shaft, this is awesome! Boss Ladd told me to wait outside but instead of Boss Ladd this chubby ol' bear came out! A real bear, a real live bear! Look at its strong build! Its beautiful fur! Its surprisingly winsome face! And its contradictingly vicious fangs! If it were a car, I'd have so much fun taking it apart!"

"No no no! Graham, that's dangerous! And even if it weren't, you can't take living things apart!"

"Don't worry... My big sister told me to take care of living things other than humans... So it sounds like instead you'll probably get taken apart by the bear! How does that sound, Shaft?!"

"It sounds awful! Don't tempt fate like that!"

Graham Specter, who could only make confusion worse, barged into the scene.

And then Victor showed his face, too.

"Goddammit! Stop the bear, you bastards! It's gonna cause an uproar!"

But as Victor drew his gun, Isaac and Miria slipped past him and out the door to stand in front of the bear.

"Hey now, just wait a second! I don't think this bear's dangerous!"

"He didn't eat us!"

"What, is that supposed to make everything okay?! You're in the way! Move! Scram! Get ouaagh?!"

Mid-shout, Victor suddenly found himself tumbling wildly through the air before smacking against the hospital gate.

"Heyy, sorry, you were just in my way and my knuckles ran into you while I was passing."

Ladd moved sluggishly past him and then cheerfully went after Graham and the bear.

In the midst of the chaos, Cookie listened to the "voice" that was calling him.

There are various opinions on the nature of bears' hearing.

Some believe that it's not all that different from humans' hearing, while others think they can hear high-pitched noises much better than humans can; still others think their hearing has adapted to pick up particularly low noises.

There may have also been individual variations between different bears, but in any case, Cookie—also known as Charlie—had much better hearing than the average bear.

Cookie himself was unaware of this, but it may have been considered a result of the various training he had received at the circus.

He'd been trained to head toward sounds that called for him.

There might be food there.

There might be a new show starting there.

There might be a new "little one" who wanted to be his friend there.

There might be an old friend waiting there.

With those concepts—almost emotions—in mind, the grizzly bear began to plod through the city.

Eventually his steps became quick, and finally he was moving through the city at what could only be called a dash, leaving the hustle and bustle of the clinic behind him.

And never realizing that Isaac and Miria were holding fast to his back.



Present

“What the hell?!”

It was definitely Carzelio Runorata’s bear that appeared in Central Park.

But Tim could also see a man and a woman riding on the bear’s back.

Also, they seemed familiar from somewhere.

And on top of that, two motorcycles burst into the park as if chasing the bear.

Are those... Carzelio’s bodyguards?!

Tim knew that these motorcycle-riding twins—once a part of Bartolo’s personal bodyguard team—were now working as Carzelio’s guards. Since the Larvae were currently working with the Runoratas, there wasn’t likely to be a fuss, Tim reasoned.

But the people in the car that appeared on the scene next were a problem.

As the car burst through the fence around the park, Tim saw Ladd Russo inside.

And furthermore, there was a man clutching a wrench and cheerfully doing a handstand on top of the speeding car.

What the actual hell?!

And on top of that, there was something clinging to the back of the car. Who was this bespectacled guy apparently holding fast to the bumper of the car even as his clothing was torn to tatters?

And Tim didn’t notice.

In the skies above Central Park, a few birds wheeled overhead as though watching the chaos gather.

Somewhere in New York Chané's apartment

"Hey, sis? It looks like Mr. Salomé and the Lamia might get in a fight with some scary people."

Chané Laforet turned Liza as her sister spoke.

At present, Liza was staying with her at her apartment; Liza was keeping an eye out for Huey's enemies, while Chané was ready to intercept them at any moment.

That said, they hadn't encountered anyone who was clearly Huey's enemy since Nader had escaped from them last night.

"I don't really like Salomé, but... what do you think we should do?"

Chané had no reason to hesitate in response to Liza's question.

Salomé was her father's subordinate, although Chané didn't know him very well.

Even so, she should probably go help her father's followers.

Chané got to her feet, her face blank and her heart little by little becoming as mechanical as it had once been.

Seeing that Chané seemed to want to know where to go, Liza averted her gaze and asked, just to make sure, "Are you going, sis?"

"?"

"That Nader guy from yesterday isn't there, but there is someone you don't really get along with. ...No, it's not just you he doesn't like. ...It's... it's me, too..."

Chané suddenly realized that something was wrong.

Her younger sister Liza—who was in some ways more mature than her—was clearly shaking.

She was afraid.

Liza was obviously ruled by a deep fear of something right now.

“...”

Chané realized that this was no small matter, picked up the notepad that was on the table, and wrote down a question.

“Who is there?”

Liza looked away, remembering the fear she once experienced, and spoke a single name.

“...It’s Ladd. ...Ladd Russo.”

“-----...!!”



And thus—the second *baccano* that made up this incident, following the one at Firo’s casino, began at a remove from Ra’s Lance, in Central Park.

Almost as if it were Christmas Eve, ushering in the final ruckus that would occur at Ra’s Lance on the third day.

Although the sun was a bit too high in the sky for it to be the “eve” of anything.

*The word here is literally “turtles” and the internet seems disinclined to explain this idiom to me, but houjicha says it means drunkards! Which, as a bonus, is pretty literally true of Victor. Thanks houjicha!

**Yes, it actually says “man”! I know that previous books have said that it’s difficult to tell this person’s gender, but the phrase here is definitely どくろのマスクの男, so there you have it.

1935-D Luckstreet Boys, Chapter 28: Words Won't Get Through Anymore

Somewhere in New York

"I've got nothing to do until tonight, *amigo*. Come on, how about I go cut up some of the other Mafiosi while they're not expecting it?"

Maria's katanas clattered at her sides while she walked. Luck, the man she was guarding, only gave a sigh.

"Maria, we still have no idea who is for us and who is against us. Do you really think that now is the time to create more enemies for ourselves?"

"But..."

"Don't 'but' me, Maria."

Maria was not the only one guarding Luck Gandor.

In addition to the regular members of the Gandor Family, he was accompanied by Raz Smith and his young disciple, along with an old man called Alkie who smelled like liquor even this early in the day.

"Heh heh... Can't believe you're showing off your own existence by exposing your life to the muzzles of those around you. You've got your own madness, don't you? And the fact that I was once your enemy but am now working for you... Madness recognizes madness, I guess."

"Sir, it's much cooler to stand guard silently."

"Hmph... Is that so. Then I will be silent... until time itself falls into madness."

Smith's conversation with his disciple aside, Alkie took a sip of the alcohol in

his hip flask.

With Maria, dressed in an eye-catching saloon girl outfit, at their center, the group proceeded down one of the city's larger streets.

Luck was trying to send a message:

That the Gandors were employing some dangerous hitmen.

The normal citizens on their turf may have simply thought, *Maria aside, it's rare to see Mr. Luck walking around with so many people*, but anyone who knew enough about the underworld would get a different impression from the display.

"The Gandors are walking around in the company of hitmen."

"And they're ones who used to be in the employ of the Runoratas, too."

In other words, it could be taken as a challenge to the Runoratas.

The Gandors wanted to separate their enemies from their allies tonight at the casino, so they were trying their hand at a bluff.

"They hired hitmen, not bodyguards, so who's their target?"

"We Runoratas are on bad terms with them..."

"Could they be after our boss?"

It would only take a little.

If the Gandors could rouse the Runoratas' suspicions, it would give them a sliver of control over their thoughts and actions.

After the incident in 1932, they'd negotiated a peace with Bartolo Runorata directly, but Luck believed that Melvi Dormentaire's actions had put a crack in that peace.

How much did Bartolo Runorata know about Melvi's actions, and just how freely was Melvi able to act?

Luck's challenge was meant to draw out just a little bit more information on that front, but instead, the "noise" they heard ringing around them shifted their destiny ever so slightly.

"Hrmm. What's that noise I keep hearing? It's annoying, *amigo*."

"I can't tell where it's coming from because it's echoing off the buildings..."

Luck wondered about the origin of the mysterious noise, but he had no concrete ideas.

It didn't change enough to be some kind of coded message, and it was far too long to be a simple signal.

Just then, Alkie spoke, his shoulders convulsing with hiccups.

"Hmm... 's from Central Park, I think."

"You can tell?"

"f I couldn't tell something like that, it'd be time for me to retire."

"Hm..."

Luck had two choices.

He could go see what was going on, or he could assume it was a trap and hole himself back up in the office.

No, if there's anything strange going on in the city, no matter how small it is, I want to know about it.

It could be unrelated to them; it could be a broken siren or something. In that case, there wouldn't be a problem, but after working as a Mafia boss for just over five years, Luck's instincts were ringing warning bells in his heart.

Something was happening in Central Park.

"...We'll go investigate. Maria, Mr. Smith, Mr. Alkie, please accompany me. The rest of you, please return to the office and tell my brothers to be cautious."

"But... will you be okay with just them?"

His bodyguard spoke in concern, but Luck just nodded firmly.

"...You understand that I won't die, don't you?"

A few minutes after that.

Luck and the others walked down the street headed for Central Park.

"Perhaps you should send the child home?"

"No good. His madness isn't that weak."

"...I see."

Luck was about to sigh at Smith's habit of dragging his disciple into everything, but— Mixed into the sound he'd been hearing for a while now, he suddenly heard something like a scream from behind him.

"?"

When he turned around, Luck's eyes opened wide.

"...?"

For a moment, he wondered if he'd fallen into a waking dream.

But the sight he saw was definitely reality, and it was steadily approaching him.

There was a bear running down the middle of the road at top speed, and on its back rode a man and a woman.

The couple looked familiar to him, but he was more confused about the fact that Ladd and Graham were chasing the bear from behind.

It felt like a very long time until they reached Luck—but in reality, it was almost instantaneous.

A giant bear, a car, and two motorcycles rushed past them.

Graham seemed to notice Luck and Smith and waved his wrench at them from atop the car.

But without any chance for him to say something to Luck, the car careened past, still chasing the bear.

Luck stared.

After a few silent moments, he was brought back to reality by Maria's out-of-place enthusiasm.

"Hey, *amigo*, d'you think I can cut that bear?"



Laborers' housing facility

"Hey, where were you last night? If you didn't come back today, we were gonna give your room to someone new."

Nader answered Roy Maddock's words with a shrug.

"Sorry, I had a late night. Hey, any idea what that noise outside is?"

"No clue... It's been going for a while now. I feel like it's pretty far off."

"Yeah..."

Losing interest, he left Roy behind for a moment to rush to the bed of his own room.

After making sure no one was watching, Nader pulled the money he'd won at the Martillo Family casino out of its ingenious hiding spot.

It's still here... I thought someone might steal it.

Nader took one of the bundles of bills and stuck it into the bag Ladd had given him.

Then, leaving his room once more, he returned to where Roy was waiting and offered him the rest of the cash.

"...I have to leave here for now. I might be back once the mess around me clears, but... here, this is my rent. Take it."

"Whoa, whoa, where'd you get this cash?! This is way too much for rent. I can't accept this!"

"Then give the change to that doctor, would you? I owe him a huge debt anyway. ...Honestly, money alone could never repay it..." Still holding the money out to Roy, Nader said, "I'd like you to take half of it, if you would. You've helped me out a lot... And if anyone ever comes around asking if I'm here, consider it repayment for the inconvenience."

They'd only known each other for a few days, but based on Nader's sense of human aesthetics, he could tell that Roy wasn't the sort of person to just take a

bunch of money and run off with it, and in the worst case scenario, Nader wouldn't mind if he did.

I'm really just trying to satisfy myself.

That's why he was trying to give Roy enough to pay the doctor, too, but Roy just sighed and shook his head.

"I really don't need it. ...But Who's bringing over some rations today, so I'll give him the money for the doctor. He's trustworthy, I can guarantee it."

That's Ladd's friend, isn't it...? Well, he certainly doesn't seem like he'd have the guts to run off with the dough, at least...

Nader gave a vague nod and continued on his way out.

As he headed down the stairs towards the entrance, a familiar voice called out to him.

"Are you leaving, Nader?"

It was Upham, a man who had been a member of the black-suited Lemures just like Nader.

He'd betrayed Nader's proposition of a coup to the rest of the Lemures, but given that he wasn't after Nader right now, Nader had no particular grudge against him, and after the incident the other day he considered the two of them even. In fact, at this point Nader even admired what he'd done.

Because the people who'd stuck with Nader in the attempted coup were all gone from this world now.

Furthermore, Upham must have either had incredible luck or incredible fighting skills to have made it off of that train alive.

"Yeah. Sorry about the other day."

"Are you going anywhere in particular?"

"Sorry, I can't tell you. It's not that I don't trust you, but... Hilton's somewhere in this city, and Chané attacked me last night."

"Wha—?!"

Upham's face changed.

"Huey's got to be nearby too. Watch your back, yeah?"

"...Are you serious? Wait, but I thought Huey was..."

He trailed off there.

Apparently Upham didn't think that prison would hold Huey Laforet for long, either.

"What was Miss Chané like?"

"...Same as ever. Eyes like a praying mantis, scary as hell."

"I see... so she's doing well..."

"...Don't tell me that you... no, forget it. Anyway, in the one-in-a-million chance that I'm still alive in a week or so, let's catch up."

Nader got the feeling from Upham's tone that he had feelings for Chané, but considering that Chané had cut off his hand and just last night tried to kill him, he wasn't really inclined to help out with Upham's romantic troubles.

Besides, I can't imagine her ever becoming someone's girlfriend...

As he pondered that, he heard Roy talking to Who in the entryway.

"What's wrong, Who? You look tired."

"Nah, it's just, there was this bear this morning..."

"A bear?"

"You know what... never mind. You're never gonna believe me unless it shows up in the papers... Why do Isaac and Miria know someone from the BOI, anyway...?"

As Who muttered to himself, Roy offered him the money he'd received from Nader.

"?"

"That money's for..."

Once he'd heard the circumstances, Who turned towards Nader as he came down the stairs.

"Y'know, I don't think Dr. Fred's gonna take this money. Apparently the police

paid for your treatment, and he's not the type to accept more money than what his work's worth."

"...Maybe you're right. Then just treat that as a donation towards this institution's rations. If he still won't take it... I won that off some money Ladd gave me, so give it back to Ladd or something."

"...Ladd did what now? I mean, that works, I guess... but Ladd says some really crazy things sometimes, so be careful, alright?"

"Yeah, I know."

Nader, who had earlier agreed to get involved with one of said crazy things, just gave a wry smile and left the institution behind him.

"Hm...?"

He noticed then that the noise that had been reverberating through the city had finally stopped at some point.

"Well, whatever..."

Deciding it had nothing to do with him, Nader continued towards his goal.

He never realized that Hilton's focus on the source of that noise would save him from detection that day.

The lucky con man made his way quickly through the alleyways of Manhattan — On his way to gamble his fate and his very life in an attempt to fool the world.



The Martillo Family's underground casino

"Oh, did that noise stop?"

Firo had been curious about the eerie noise, but he realized it probably wasn't important enough for him to leave the casino, so he'd continued his work.

But as the noise suddenly quieted, he turned his interest towards it again.

"What was that? Don't tell me some of Huey's underlings are up to something..."

At that, Christopher—who'd been discussing something with Ricardo in a corner of the casino—approached Firo and offered, "Want me to go check it out? I'll let you know if anything's up."

"Yeah... Ricardo's not so much a problem, but you're obnoxious whenever you're around, so you'd just be in the way here."

"Wow, I didn't know you were the type to be so blunt with people just 'cause they're your friends!" Christopher cackled with a self-deprecating shrug.

"Yeah, I guess," Firo said offhandedly, continuing his work.

"Huh?"

Christopher's* red eyes widened at Firo's unexpected response.

"I dunno if I'd call you a friend, but I realize I'm stuck with you at this point. So I don't want you doing anything too crazy. I'd be sad if someone I know—even someone like you—died, and if you turned against me and I had to kill you myself, it'd leave a bad taste in my mouth no matter how much of a lowlife you are. Try not to worry the people you call friends, you know?"

Firo's response was half-ironic, and he didn't look up from his work, but Christopher still seemed quite surprised.

"What a shock! Don't you think that's a little too kind of you, Firo? Do you tell all your friends that?"

"I'm telling you because you're a dangerous guy. ...I mean, now that you mention it, other than everyone from the Family and my friends from childhood—who're more like my brothers—I don't really have a lot of friends, huh... Maybe Isaac and Miria? And they're dangerous in their own way. Other than that... Czes is more like a little brother, too..."

Firo smiled wryly. Christopher, who had a good idea of who Firo surrounded himself with, spoke the name he'd left out.

"...What about that Ennis girl?"

"She's like family to me, too. Just like the Martillos."

He answered without a moment's pause.

But that was the only time his hands stilled on his work and he looked at Christopher.

His gaze didn't waver at all.

Christopher gave a little shiver at how **unwavering** his eyes were.

"I see! ...Well, as her fellow homunculus, I'll do what I can to help, OK?"

"Thanks, I appreciate the sentiment. ...But this is our problem. The Russo Family is our guest right now, and we can't cause you any trouble. ...Hey, wait, are you sure you should be talking about that stuff so openly?"

Christopher was a different type of homunculus from Ennis.

Unlike Ennis, who was completely unaging and undying just as Immortals were, Christopher didn't age, but he could die.

That didn't seem like something that should be general knowledge; was it alright for Ricardo Russo to hear it?

Firo's eyes suggested that question, but Christopher's answer was completely indifferent.

"Oh, it's fine," he said with a shrug. "Ricardo knows a lot of this stuff already. A lot of it."

Firo cocked his head, but he supposed that Christopher must have trusted Ricardo enough to let it go. Returning to his work, he said, "Be careful, alright? I know you don't need a bodyguard, but you do have to look after your boss. Even if tomorrow's main event, there's no telling what could happen today."

"I know! Off I go, then, see you later!"

So saying, Christopher left the casino.

After a little while, Firo spoke up while he continued to work.

"I don't know how you two know each other, but do you get along with him?"

The question was meant for Ricardo, but no answer came.

Firo turned and looked around the casino, but the Russo Family's boss was

nowhere to be found.

"Wait... did he head out with Christopher?"

As he climbed the stairs out of the casino, Christopher spoke to Ricardo, who walked beside him.

"You could stay here if you want."

"No... I think I should go, too."

"Yeah? What has Sham been saying?"

"Apparently it's started. We don't know why, but apparently the Immortal who's part of the BOI is there, too, so be careful."

Ricardo was mentally linked to "Sham," one of the teams that worked under Huey, so she was able to converse with them inside her head.

And in fact, though Sham could be called "them," in reality there was only one main personality with its consciousness spread out between many bodies across America. Sham was an individual, but he was also a hive mind, and he was in charge of Huey's information network.

Since Ricardo shared part of her consciousness with Sham, she was able to see what was happening in far-off places.

Of course, there were also times that she learned things she didn't want to know and had to act because of them.

"You said that Salomé and Chi and Sickle are going at it with that violent relative of yours and the wrench-wielding crazy? I guess Sickle and that wrench guy really are linked by fate."

"...Yeah. I don't think Salomé knows about Graham or Uncle Ladd, though. Honestly, I have no idea how the bear or Isaac and Miria are going to react. Rail's not there. It sounds like he's doing something else with an Immortal named Czes."

There was no way the situation Ricardo described was going to play out peacefully, but Christopher wore a gentle, delighted smile as he skipped

towards Central Park.

"You look happy, Chris."

"You could say that."

Between his light steps and his vicious smile, Christopher was in high spirits.

"Well, I get to see everyone I lost touch with again in Central Park, a slice of nature unnaturally created in the middle of the city! Isn't life fascinating? And on top of that, there's a giant bear there! What would it be natural or unnatural for this bear to do, this child of nature who was raised unnaturally, when he winds up in the middle of an unnatural slice of nature? ...Wait, I lost track of what I was saying! Haha!"

Watching him, Ricardo sighed quietly.

"Chris, you really change your tune from day to day. You could give Graham a run for his money."

"He changes his tune every second, don't compare me to him!"

With a vicious smile that revealed countless sharpened fangs, Christopher raised his arms in thanks to the blue sky peeking down between the buildings and **danced as he walked**.

"Well, don't worry about all the small stuff; let's dance! Dance! This situation may be unexpected, but I'm sure someone's still in control. We'll just have to kick our way through those people's control. For whom? For whomever nature has chosen!"

Christopher was shouting absolute nonsense.

But watching her "subordinate," Ricardo was sure of one thing—

That today, Christopher was in a much better mood than normal.

It was probably because someone he'd thought wanted him gone had said they were stuck together. Realizing that, Ricardo was a little jealous that Christopher had made a new friend—but as Christopher's friend herself, she decided to simply share in his happiness.

And rather than show that emotion on her face, she just told Sham within her own heart, a little proud of herself.



Central Park

“This is bad... This is really bad...”

One Sham—Shaft—heard Ricardo’s pride and went pale as he realized how the situation in front of him was about to take a turn for the worse.

This mess is bad enough, and now Christopher’s coming in high spirits like that...?

He gritted his teeth as he watched the situation unfolding in front of him.

It was a lawless battle.

There was no word that would better describe this chaotic situation better than that.

Let’s turn this tale back a few minutes.

Both pleased that the bear had come and puzzled by the hangers-on, Salomé turned his amplifier’s switch off.

The first two to grasp the situation had been Graham, swinging his wrench from atop the roof of the car, and the members of Larvae who had fought with him earlier.

“Wh...?! What’s he doing here?!” Sickle cried.

Frank yelped, his enormous body shivering, and Chi just grimaced.

Graham, on the other hand, tilted his head as he looked around before finally shouting, “Ah!” He pointed his giant wrench at a single man.

Namely, the bearded man who had taken a step back from Sickle and the rest when he realized that things were about to get violent: the Poet.

“It’s God! What is the God of Language doing here?!”

“...”

Not expecting to be pinpointed first, the Poet’s eyes widened beneath the brim of his hat.

Salomé narrowed his eyes. “...Do you know him, Poet?”

On the other hand, Ladd stretched his shoulders as he got of the car and asked Graham, “You know that bearded guy?”

“I’m so happy... Let me tell you a happy story! Boss Ladd, he’s a god! A god with the power to control language!

“With one word from him, the wind sings across the rustling surface of my mental landscape, and all the little birds disturbed by the wind dance, and the volcano explodes and all the taxes go up! My soul is done for!”

As if in concert, the Poet turned towards Salomé and tried to explain Graham.

“He is power. He is confusion. He is law. He is virtue. If fate is a wheel for truth, then the bonds between men are like the door of a deserted house trapped in that wheel’s furrow! Sometimes it travels to purgatory, and other times it leads the soul to an endless wasteland... Flee! Oh, flee! Turn your wheels and flee as far as you can! But how tragic... the furrow will never escape from this fate... And therefore life will be borne unto death and once more unto life...”

“...Sickle, a translation?”

Sickle clicked her tongue at Salomé’s request and said, “He’s saying, ‘Oh no, we’ve met this terrible man again. He’s dangerous, so you need to run.’”

“Run?” Salomé shook his head in disbelief. “Hahaha, Poet, have you grown so used to your own eloquent speech that your thought patterns have gone awry? Look at all the Larvae who are here; there’s no need to escape...”

But his confident expression wavered at Sickle’s next words.

“I’ll do my best to slow him down. Everyone else needs to escape while I do.

Forget about reclaiming the bear for now.”

Watching Sickle step forward as she spoke, the rest of the Larvae looked at each other.

“Wait just a second, Sickle. Are you mocking the results of my research? Including yourself? Even alone, your battle strength far surpasses a normal person’s. From the right distance, you could probably defeat three Mafiosi wielding shotguns without taking a hit.”

“Oh really? Then this is easy to explain: that man is far more dangerous than three shotguns.”

She dropped her gaze to her own ankle, her face twisted by past humiliation.

“He dislocated the bones of my foot with that wrench. In the middle of battle. While taking on Frank, Chi, and Liza at the same time!”

Ladd was enjoying what he overheard of their conversation. He turned to Graham and said, “Oho, I see. That bearded guy does seem like someone you’d like. You know what would be interesting, I’d like to see him meet that bastard Smith. I wonder what they’d talk about.”

“The God of Language, meeting Boss Smith? Terrifying... let me tell you a terrifying story... If you take the mental landscape of Boss Smith, twisted by madness as it is, and add the God of Language to it, what will happen to this world? Will the changes stay within Boss Smith’s soul? There’s no way! Those words overflowing with madness will turn into bullets and gush forth into the real world! The stars will swirl like a sandstorm! The wind will burn like lava! What a radiant, infinite darkness! This is *bad*, Boss Ladd, if those two meet, the world is done for!”

“What’s with him?! He just sounds like a drunk!”

“Oh, he’s sober. He hasn’t touched drugs or alcohol, but his mind is completely kaput. That’s what makes him terrifying. If we attack without taking him seriously, everyone here will suffer the backlash.”

Sickle's words baffled those around her.

"That's impossible. It's not like he's that redhead assassin!" Salomé cried unthinkingly, remembering his recent encounter with Claire Stanfield a.k.a. Felix. Since Sickle didn't know Claire, she could only tilt her head, but—

"...What was that?"

The response came from someone Salomé didn't expect.

"Hey, old man, did you just say 'redheaded assassin?'"

"Who's that? No, wait... he was on the list of people to watch out for..."

He took some papers out of his pocket and began to flip through them easily, reading what was written there.

"...Could he be this 'Ladd Russo'...? And the man with the wrench is Graham Specter?" Salomé asked suspiciously.

And, looking at the two of them, he noticed the Runorata Family's twin bodyguards getting off their bikes and approaching the giant bear, Cookie.

"I see, they've already found him. But it was our contribution that called the bear here. I believe we can call this experiment a success," Salomé muttered to himself, all interest in Ladd Russo about to disappear from his head— But before his interest could disappear, he realized that Ladd had disappeared from his line of sight.

"Hm...?"

In the next moment, he felt a strong impact from below.

"~~!!"

The palm of a hand thrust its way suddenly back into his line of sight and into his throat.

Without pause, his attacker grabbed him by the neck and lifted him high into the air with one arm.

"Don't ignore me, now. I'll get lonely."

The voice from below was tinged deeply with malice.

Ladd had been over five yards away, but in the moment that Salomé had taken his eyes off him, he'd made his way forward and assaulted Salomé from his blind spot.

"You bastard! Let go of Salomé!"

The Larvae, seeing the Runorata bodyguards, had assumed that Ladd was on their side and hadn't responded to the sudden change in events in time. All at once, they rushed at Ladd, but— Before they could reach him, a silver disk blocked their way:

Graham Specter, spinning his wrench at top speed so that it turned into a shield.

And as he spun the wrench so quickly that the afterimage made it look like a shield, he said, "How sad... Let me tell you a sad story..."

Spinning his "shield" that could become a deadly weapon at any moment, Graham raised his voice to a roar. "Boss Ladd was in the middle of a lecture! One-sided explanations of what it means to live and die... that is how Boss Ladd teaches. He's not even a teacher, yet he takes the time to instruct people... I could never be like him... In other words, well, let's cut out the rest! I'd like you to stay out of this."

As Graham spewed his incredibly self-centered request, one of the Larvae leapt forward in an attempt to get him out of their way—

And so the chaos began.



Alveare Restaurant & Bar Inside the office

"...Ronny's not back yet, huh?" the Martillo Family's *capo societa*, Molsa Martillo, asked the *contaiuolo*, Maiza Avaro, who was in the office with him.

"No, I haven't heard from him at all. ...This has never happened before."

"Hmm..."

From what Molsa could see, Maiza was superficially calm.

But the way he carried himself was ever so slightly different from the norm, and Molsa could tell that he was shaken.

"Well, he's 'gone missing' a few times before. And he did say, before he joined the Family, that that would happen. We took him in knowing that, and Ronny's work more than makes up for it. Isn't that right?"

"Yes... He's saved the Family a number of times."

"The other outfits in the area probably think we can't do anything if Ronny's not around... the Runoratas, too," Molsa chuckled.

Maiza hurried to deny it: "I'm sure that's not..."

"No, wait now. I'm not saying that to put us down."

"?"

"This is something I can say only because I'm sure Ronny will be fine, but..."

Maiza may not have tilted his head, but his question was clear in his eyes. Molsa explained offhandedly.

"I don't think we've ever been in such a perfect position."

"A perfect position?"

"There are a lot of other outfits involved in that casino party. On top of that, that Melvi kid has raised a hand against our Family. We're practically at war with the Runoratas, and to most people it probably looks like a school of sardines trying to take on a shark... or just a shark preying on us."

In fact, the Martillo Family was one of the smallest organizations in New York, and unlike the Mafia, it had no connections to other outfits. Like the Gandors, they held their limited territory all on their own.

But limited though it was, their territory *was* part of Manhattan.

Any number of organizations would have loved to get their hands on it, and the Runoratas probably thought it would be the perfect stepping stone to begin encroaching on Manhattan.

"And on top of that, the pivotal Ronny Schiatto is nowhere to be found. ... Doesn't that sound perfect? We don't even have to pretend to be weak for

them to underestimate us. Well, Bartolo Runorata isn't the type of man to underestimate anyone... but from what I've heard, who knows about that Melvi kid?"

"Yes, from what I've heard, he certainly does have a lot of confidence in himself."

Melvi Dormentaire closely resembled Maiza's younger brother, Gretto.

It awoke complicated feelings within Maiza, and he wanted to know more about his real identity and descent, but he couldn't prioritize that right now.

Melvi had raised a hand against the Family.

Even if he'd been Maiza's brother in the flesh, Maiza had sworn to stab the Family's enemies with his own knife.

He drew on that deep resolve and regarded Melvi as nothing more than an enemy for now.

Tapping his fingers against the office desk, Molsa explained their next objective to Maiza.

"But to babble on and imagine the reactions of someone I've never met is the very picture of underestimation. ...Firo is the one who's met him personally, so we should prioritize his decisions on the battlefield."

A strangely boyish smile came to Molsa's aged, refined face as he looked around at the handful of men in the room.

"Let's give Ronny a rest for once, shall we?

"Let's let him know that his Family is strong enough to give him a nice vacation once in a while."



Central Park

"Wow, this is even more incredible than I imagined!" Christopher said, eyes shining as he approached his destination, Central Park. Around him, passersby

fled.

"How long until the police come, I wonder? Or maybe someone's taking pains that they don't come... Well, the first few police officers who come running won't be able to do much anyway. Not about this."

The scene reflected in Christopher's eyes could only be called a melee.

Ladd Russo and Graham Specter, a two-man team, were taking on the members of Larvae in an overwhelming battle, and a pair of twins Christopher had never seen before were riding their motorcycles around the perimeter of the fray.

On the edge of the fray was a giant bear with Isaac and Miria sitting across its back, and a woman in white and one of Graham's underlings, Shaft, stood next to a nearby car.

And on top of that, there was a man in glasses and torn-up clothes lying in a heap behind the car; he was at that moment trying to stand up.

Since the battle itself was really only Ladd and Graham teamed up against Larvae, it may not have been appropriate to refer to it as a melee, but because of their ridiculous fighting styles, it looked to Christopher's eyes like nothing so much as disaster given flesh to wreak havoc indiscriminately.

"Ha haa! You guys sure have an interesting way of fighting! Are you street performers?!"

The Larvae attacked with all the wiles at their disposal, but Ladd just answered their attacks with his own two arms.

Stopping a kick from Sickle with his right hand, he blocked Chi's claws with his steel left arm and kicked another attacker out of the way.

"Dammit... He's a friend of the man in the blue coveralls...? They're both superhuman!"

Sickle assessed Ladd's strength, disregarding the fact that she herself was a homunculus.

In fact, Sickle wasn't the only one who felt that way; as a scientist, Salomé too

thought that Ladd's physical strength was beyond the norm.

Maybe it was because he had killed so many people, or for some other reason, but it seemed that he was able to push his body past the limits that the brain normally imposed on his muscles and bones to keep him from getting hurt.

He was probably bruising his bones and tearing his muscles to shreds as he fought, but it seemed that the pain only encouraged him.

And his companion was his own kind of bizarre.

"How sad... Let me tell you a sad story. A lot has happened between me and this lady in the green dress here, but I thought we had taken a gradual step towards peace in that restaurant. But now, what is this?! Boss Ladd suddenly got all excited, and now we're enemies again... If this is what they call destiny, I'm never going to another restaurant again! You hear me?"

"What the hell are you talking about? If you don't want to fight, just stop this madman! And besides, I haven't forgotten about the time you dislocated my ankle!" Sickle shouted.

Graham spun his wrench as he answered. "I see... then your anger is justified! That means the restaurant is innocent! What a wonderful story. They say you need calcium to build strong bones... Apparently some impressive scientists proved that in 1921 by experimenting on mice, but what does that mean for dislocation? Does calcium help with the connections between bones?! Dammit, I won't get any sleep tonight! Maybe you need more than just calcium to avoid dislocation—what if you need to balance all your nutrients right...? Then that means that restaurants are actually fighting on humanity's team... So once your revenge is complete, let's all go to a restaurant together! Peace will reign and the butterflies will sing... Wait, do butterflies sing?!"

"Who cares?!" Sickle stomped her foot, a vein in her forehead pulsing. "You and the Poet both! You're men, aren't you? You're supposed to communicate with your bodies, not your words!"

"Communicate with my body...? You mean like sign language?"

"No! Are you mocking me?!"

A sharp kick aimed at the back of Graham's head.

Graham avoided it, only for another Larvae member's *kusari-fundo*** to come flying at him.

Graham caught that around his wrench and leapt towards another opponent — Swinging the chain he'd caught as a new part of his own weapon.

The situation was absolute chaos, but one pair of eyes watched it calmly.

Not the newly-arrived Christopher—

But the very cause of the commotion, who had been watching over the situation from the beginning.



What's going on?

I came because I thought someone called me, but my friends aren't here.

There are lots of people. They're making a fuss. There's someone on my back too.

It's really loud, but it seems like they're having fun. It's familiar.

I remember. I remember this. This is a "**ser-kus**."

Where's Mr. Ringleader? What about Parrot?

I don't see glittery Mr. Doubs, either. But something smells like him.

Where are Claire and Cazze? I saw them yesterday. Where are they?

Maybe they'll come if I call loudly.

↔

The roar of a giant grizzly bear echoed through Central Park.

There was no hostility or bloodlust in it, but almost everyone there stopped moving for a second.

Their instincts as living beings feared the roar of an animal with more power than them.

Even Ladd and Graham and Christopher, though they weren't afraid of the roar, felt every cell in their bodies urge them to be careful.

Every gaze on the scene went to the giant bear.

They were so focused that even Salomé, Sickle, and the rest of the Larvae didn't notice that Christopher was right there.

The bear, Cookie, on the other hand, looked around the area as if searching for something— But then his gaze stopped in one place.

On a black shadow that was drawing near.

It wasn't who he was waiting for, though.

"Hm...?"

Ladd noticed that the bear's gaze had stopped and looked where it was looking—but in that instant, a flash of silver approached him.

"Whoopsidaisy!"

He got his false left hand up just in time, and the sound of metal on metal rang loudly throughout the area.

It was a familiar face that had appeared before Ladd.

"...Hey there."

“...”

“Looks like you survived, huh?”

Ladd smiled wickedly, and the black shadow leapt backwards.

It was Chané Laforet, clad in a black dress and clutching a knife in each hand.

“...”

Chané glared at Ladd without a word.

In her eyes, there was a sharp light of hostility and murderous intent mixed together.

“Oh! It’s Chané! I see... So the time has come for her destiny and Boss Ladd’s to intertwine once more? Oh, how sad... Let me tell you a sad story! I definitely don’t hate Chané, and I am unable to betray Ladd. Does that mean I can’t be on either of their sides?! No! I must be on both their sides! That means I have to make sure no one interrupts moment of the century in which they will resolve their grudges. It’s the reason I was born... Is that an exaggeration?! No, of course it isn’t! People find meaning in their lives in thousands and millions of ways!”

“What, do you two know each other? ...Whoops!”

In the split-second that he’d looked towards Graham, Chané’s knife had almost sliced through his throat.

Avoiding it in the last second, Ladd took one step back and shouted at his opponent to provoke her. “Ha! You’re good, missy, you’re good! Even better than on the roof of that train! Looking at your face, I know for sure that Huey Laforet is somewhere around here!”



“...”

But Chané’s emotions didn’t waver for an instant.

Silently, she leapt at Ladd’s chest with two, three quick slashes.

Ladd used his false hand as a shield to brush the attacks off and swung a right hook with enough force in it to crush a bat at her.

Chané avoided it just in time and took a big step back for the moment.

“Miss Chané?! What on earth are you doing here?!”

Salomé’s words reached her ears, but she didn’t take her focus off of Ladd.

She knew that he was not an opponent that she could show weakness to, even for a second.

At the same time, the emotions inside of her boiled down to a single conclusion.

Her memories of the past finally overtook her emotions.

The *Flying Pussyfoot*.

As she remembered fighting Ladd on the roof of that train, her blood began to rush through her veins—overwriting the will to fight onto every muscle.

And now the curtain opened on the real melee.

Words were unnecessary.

Everyone here were beasts who had forgotten order.

As if to communicate that, Chané dashed forward.

* lit. Ricardo; pretty sure it’s a typo given that the red eyes are specified. Though I don’t doubt that Ricardo’s surprised, too...

** A pair of counterweights on either end of a chain.

1935-D Luckstreet Boys, Chapter 29: It Can't Be Helped

Somewhere in New York A Runorata villa In the parlor

“...In Central Park?”

As Melvi Dormentaire furrowed his brow, Huey Laforet answered with a light smile on his face.

“Yes, it looks like it could become quite the commotion. A large number of people witnessed a giant bear running through the city. It escaped into Central Park, so the BOI has requested that the police close the park off from visitors... But even so, I doubt they’ll be able to fool all of the onlookers.”

“That Salomé... Why would he do something so showy?”

“I’m sure he wanted to demonstrate the results of his research in his own way. To be able to freely control a bear using sound would be quite useful... And I believe he wants to put the Runorata Family in his debt.”

Huey spoke disinterestedly, still smiling, but Melvi grimaced as he answered.

“Am I insufficient to control the Runoratas from within, Mr. Laforet?”

“Not at all. I do not feel that you’re insufficient, but nor am I attempting to control the Runoratas. However, there may be other people who wish to do so, and even within the Runoratas there are a number of people who feel that you and I are in their way.”

“I just hope this won’t have any effects on the casino party tonight or tomorrow.”

“It shouldn’t; the incident at Central Park is unconnected to Ra’s Lance, at

least on the surface. Despite the fact that all the major players are involved with the casino party.”

“And you’re fine with that?”

“Is it against the wishes of the House Dormentaire?” Huey asked, as if testing Melvi.

Melvi narrowed his eyes slightly.

Looking down on me? You won’t be able to make that face for much longer.

Melvi had been sent by the House Dormentaire to be subordinate to the Immortal known as Huey Laforet, but he had no respect for Huey at all.

Don’t you get it?

It’s true that you’ve been immortal for a long time, but that just means you’ve built up more knowledge than me.

But I could stretch out my right hand right now and...

—.

For a moment, time stopped for Melvi.

Or perhaps not just his thoughts but even his heart stopped for a second.

And then he realized **there was something on his forehead.**

When he realized that that something was Huey Laforet’s right hand, he froze, a cold sweat leaking out of every pore of his body.

No. Nonono.

When... when did he...?!

“I’ve had a knack for this since I was a child. If all you need to do is reach your right hand out towards a man in front of you, it really only takes a moment.”

“Ah... kkh...”

Melvi couldn’t speak; he couldn’t even breathe.

“You let down your guard far too often, Melvi. In this state, it would be a

simple matter for Firo Prochainezo to eat you if he seriously made up his mind to kill you. I can't recommend being in the same building as him, let alone the same room."

"..."

Huey removed his hand from the forehead of the still-silent Melvi and stood.

Furious, Melvi wanted to leap up and reach his right hand out towards Huey—but every nerve in his body rejected the order from his brain.

A second later, his mind understood.

He's got no openings.

Melvi certainly had an emotional streak, but he wasn't foolish enough to suddenly set himself on a path to self-destruction.

If he were, he wouldn't have managed to become the leader of Time in the first place.

It was as though all the experience he'd gathered in his own **fairly long** life up until this point had shouted, *this is not your time to go.*

"...Don't worry. I won't underestimate Firo Prochainezo as an opponent."

"I think there are plenty of others besides Firo that you had best not underestimate. Actually, a number of those people are in Central Park right now."

"...It's fine, I'll do something about them, too. By myself."

"There's really no need to get so worked up. As long as you succeed at the casino party, or even if you fail—as long as the casino is open at that time, my purpose will be achieved."

Huey shrugged and went to leave the parlor.

"Honestly, your hostility towards Firo Prochainezo and the commotion at Central Park are all decoys to me. But to you and those involved, these issues are incredibly important. I have no intention of interfering with those results, so..."

With the same depthless smile, Huey closed the door to the outside and

offered a word of encouragement to the still-frozen Melvi.

“Please, enjoy this gamble to the fullest... so that you have no regrets.”

↔

Central Park

“Haha! Hahahahaha! Hey, Miss Martian Girl, it’s been a while!”

It was Ladd Russo who spoke the first challenge.

Of course, even if Chané had been able to freely use words, she would have had no intention of speaking to Ladd.

And Ladd didn’t seem inclined to listen, either, so she ignored Ladd’s words and flashed the knives she gripped in each hand through the air numerous times.

“Yeah, yeah, it’s really been too long! How’s it going? Is your rebellious stage over? Do you still have a thing for Huey Laforet or... whoops!”

Ladd bent over backwards as he continued his high-energy shouting, and a flash of silver passed through where his throat had been just a moment before.

Then, rather than backing away from the next few attacks, he straightened in such a way that he slipped between the strikes.

“!!”

Before the next blade could come at him, Ladd’s counterattack struck Chané’s body.

A shock as heavy as a shot put ball ran through Chané’s forehead, but by pulling back just in time, she was able to avoid the worst of the damage.

“Haha! I meant to break your nose, my aim sucks!”

“...”

His smile was as vicious as it had been back then.

Chané considered Ladd her sworn enemy.

She knew that she had been at a disadvantage on the train, and that they were ill-matched.

But Chané didn't falter.

Unlike on the roof of the train, her footing was sure here.

That meant that Chané's moves were even more impressive than they had been when she had first fought with Ladd.

Ladd benefited from that factor as well, but Chané's fighting style relied on speed and attacking from all directions, and with a more solid footing and more space to move around, the environment favored her more.

At least, Chané herself believed that, but she didn't let her guard down.

She couldn't ignore that the solid footing also improved Ladd's footwork and his ability to increase the force of his fists by pushing off from the ground.

Chané pictured the optimal way to slit Ladd's throat and glided her blade along that "path" without even a millimeter of error.

But her blade moved just a hair slower than her imagination, and Ladd managed to avoid it. Rather than cutting his artery, she left only a shallowly-bleeding scrape on his throat.

But naturally, that wasn't the end of Chané's movements.

She glided the knife through the air in a precise arc, aiming for Ladd's side while he was still bent back to avoid her, but—

"Whoops, watch out!"

His metal hand flicked the blade out of the way.

Still, Chané did not stop.

She struck out with her blade as she turned.

Ladd stopped it between the joints of his false hand.

The grinding, metallic noise of the joints rang out between them, but only their murderous intent continued to shape the air around them.

"..."

"Hahahaha! Good! Fantastic! Your movements are even sharper than they were before! And we were both pretty sharp in the head to begin with!"

Lacking the ability to speak, Chané was utterly focused on the battle; meanwhile, Ladd rattled on as he threw his weight around. Even so, that weight—his violent strength—never wavered.

Even the challenges he spouted felt like nothing more than a way to vent extra energy. He gave the impression of joking away, but if killing intent could be said to have degrees of purity, then no one in New York was radiating a purer intent to kill than Ladd Russo.

Since he knew both of them, Shaft realized this, but there was one thing he hadn't noticed.

The bloodlust that Ladd radiated was not directed at Chané standing before him.

It was pointed at Huey Laforet, Melvi Dormentaire, and Claire Stanfield—three men who weren't even present.

"What's... *with* that man?"

Sickle considered backing Chané up, but this didn't look like a battle she could make her way into from the outside.

One of the Larvae's musclemen tried to pin Ladd's arms behind his back, but he was brushed aside with a one arm and a cry of "Hey now, I'm having fun, don't interrupt!"

Watching her companion who weighed over 100 kilograms fly through the air, Sickle couldn't help but speak up to Graham as he stood in their way.

"Any way you look at it, his strength is out of the norm! Who the hell is that man? How do you have to be raised to wind up like that?"

"Boss Ladd had a completely normal home life! He says his normal parents kept him away from the Mafia and raised him normally. But! Boss Ladd fought back against those circumstances to become a homicidal lunatic, because he's not just anybody! He used to use shotguns and knives and stuff before he went to prison, but now, Boss Ladd doesn't even need those! He's a messenger of peace who will destroy all the guns and knives in the world!"

Graham's eyes opened wide behind his bangs as he spoke, but from behind

him, Ladd spoke up as he continued to avoid Chané's knives.

"Nah, kid, that's not true! If I had a shotgun or knife with me, I'd use 'em! But I'm just not in the mood right now. With guns, I can feel that *bang* of recoil in my hands and see the splash of blood and then I know for sure 'Yeah, I killed 'em!', and with knives there's that feeling of *shunk* and I can feel the warm blood on my hands and then I know, 'Aw, yeah, I really killed 'em good!' so they all have their advantages!"

Ladd continued to avoid Chané's attacks with footwork reminiscent of a pro boxer, babbling on almost as if his mouth and vocal cords belonged to a completely different creature.

"But lately I just love, love, *love* the feeling of smashing someone's face in or snapping their neck, you know?! In the end it doesn't matter whether it's a *bang* or a *shunk* or a *smash* or a *snap*. They're all great! Right?! I just need to make sure my opponent knows I'm gonna kill 'em. Point a gun at anyone and they'll get that they could be killed in one shot! I hear people say that it's only right to kill people who realize they're gonna die, and that's what I do. I give them the chance to realize that. It'd be rude otherwise, right?"

"What?! I think you changed subjects in the middle there, but in other words, based on what you said at the beginning, I was wrong again?!"

"Nah, it's not like I need those things to kill people, so you're half-right. You get fifty points... whoops!"

As he spoke, Ladd rolled forward to avoid Chané's leaping attack, passing by her from below.

The furrow on Sickle's forehead deepened as she watched him.

"How can he avoid the knives at that speed while he's shouting like that?"

A man wearing a knowing expression, who had at some point come to her side, answered her.

"You've got it backwards—he can move that well because he's moving his body to the rhythm of his own words."

"...?!"

Sickle did a double take to confirm the man who'd spoken to her and shouted, "Chris?! What are you doing here?!"

"Nature led me here. It's been a few months! Let's all sing a song that celebrates our reunion and praises Mother Nature! ♪Led here by a bear~ we meet again~ inside his stomach~ lalala~♪ ♪Sorry~ the rhythm of my body~ and all that~ just made up something~ really random~ there~♪"

Christopher sang the last bit in a needlessly operatic style, and the others realized his presence when they heard it.

"Oh, so *you're* here, you evil spirit... It seems that all my sad stories and happy stories end here."

"Miria, look! It's one of the magicians from before!" "You're right!"

"Chris?!" "Christopher!" "...So you finally decided to show." "Christopher! Where's Rail?!"

As Graham, Isaac and Miria, and all the Larvae raised their voices in shock, Christopher nodded towards Chané and Ladd, who hadn't even noticed what was happening.

"Don't worry about all that small stuff, let's see how this plays out."

"You wanna hear something? I met that Huey Laforet bastard."

"..."

A sudden pronouncement from Ladd.

Chané kept attacking as before.

She had heard a certain amount of what had happened in Alcatraz from Huey himself, so she was aware that Ladd had been there.

"Man, the guy just lay down and took a nap right in front of me... If I'd been one of those 'Immortals,' I coulda just stretched out my hand and bam, the end! What were you up to while your precious Huey was in that tight spot? Were you wandering through New York and seeing the sights? Perfect! I'm jealous! You got to trudge around enjoying the Big Apple in exchange for Huey's life, yahoo!"

“...”

Chané tried to stab at Ladd’s fist while he chattered on, fighting back the whole while, but she only managed to nick his false hand, and her arm was flicked away.

Heavy.

Chané narrowed her eyes and calmly observed her opponent’s “weapon,” her murderous intent not fading.

She could tell from the sensation and sharpness of hitting it that it was solid metal.

Regardless of what kind of training it had taken to learn to control a false hand that started halfway down his arm, he wielded it with the same ease and speed as he did his real fist.

Remembering her past humiliation, Chané was sure:

This man may not have had a gun like he did on the train, but even so, he was even more of a threat now.

“...”

As the fists came swinging at her again and again, she felt their weight whether they were the false one or the real one.

If she took even one direct hit, she probably wouldn’t make it out of this unscathed.

But Chané still managed to weave her way between the swinging fists.

She erased the ordinary life she’d lived for the past few years from her head, erased her hopes for her own future, erased even the conversations she’d had with her father in the past few days—everything but this exact instant.

If happiness remained in her mind, she could fear losing it.

And that fear could become terror and slow her feet.

Huey had taught her that to protect herself, to perfectly execute her mission, she must always hold on to a little bit of fear, but in this moment alone she rejected that memory.

Because the man in front of her right now—

He would feed on her fear.

So it was fine if she was just an attacking wind-up doll.

And so Chané cleared her mind and kept swinging her blade along the optimal routes, little by little becoming a system sustained by the intention to kill.

But seeing her, the desires of Ladd's heart only soared higher and higher.

As he watched the woman in front of him try to abandon her own humanity for the sake of Huey Laforet, Ladd discovered with pleasant surprise that she was a wall that he would enjoy breaking down.

"Ohh, ohh, I see what's happening!"

Sparks leapt before his vision as his false hand and the knife clashed against each other.

"I was wondering why that Huey bastard looked so relaxed, but it all makes sense to me now."

But Ladd withstood the attack without even flinching. His eyes blazing, he shouted, "After all, he's got all these thick, heated, passionate, bloodthirsty walls protecting him!"

"..."

"How many more walls are there? How close are you to Huey? ...Hey, bird girl! You're watching his from somewhere too, aincha?!"

As Ladd shouted that, the wings of a few of the birds circling overhead faltered.

But no one noticed, and most tilted their heads at Ladd's words.

"Bird girl! You tell Huey he'd better get all of his walls ready and put 'em in front of me! Tell him I'm looking forward to finding out whether he can still make that relaxed face once I've torn them all down!"

Listening to his words alone, it would be natural to assume that a man shouting that much in the middle of a fight would have plenty of openings—but everyone on the scene, from the Larvae who specialized in battle to the pair

watching the fight as they rode around on their motorcycles, could tell that Ladd had no openings at all.

If Chané Laforet was an endlessly glittering whirlwind of blades, Ladd was all the energy of a volcano about to erupt stuffed into a thick leather bag.

And the two threats continued to strike their speed and strength against each other.

Everyone who knew their true strength reached the same obvious conclusion, the truth rising easily and quietly within their hearts.

Whoever takes the first blow isn't going to get off easy.



In the midst of this chaos, two shapes watched Ladd from within the car that had driven into the park.

"Do, um... do you want to stop him, Miss Lua?"

"Ladd... looks like he's having fun..."

Realizing he might get dragged into things if he stayed outside, Shaft had retreated to the driver's seat and asked Lua his question.

"I'm just thinking what it would be like if I were as strong as that girl."

"I don't think you should think about that too much."

"You think so? ...Sometimes I think that if only I were strong enough that Ladd and I could try to kill each other head-on, maybe we would understand each other better. ...I'll never be able to make Ladd that angry, or make him smile that much..."

Lua sounded a little lonely.

Shaft answered, "But in terms of liking someone as a woman, he likes you much better, Lua."

"Hm?"

"He said something once..."

These words were ones that Shaft had heard through Sham in prison, but he

hid that from Lua in explaining the incident to her.

"Apparently, he was surrounded by a handful of punks who asked him, 'Don't you care about what happens to that Lua broad?' He said, 'Lua is waiting to be killed by me. She promised me that she'd never be killed by anyone else. And I trust her more than anyone else.'"

"Ladd... said that?"

"...I mean, it sounds kind of awful at first blush, but I think he really believes it. That you'll never be killed by anyone but him, that is."

Ladd had been speaking to Firo at the time, and Sham had been on the floor, having been punched out by Ladd, so there were parts of it he didn't remember too well, but he filled in the story little by little to conceal that fact.

After hearing what he had to say, Lua thought for a moment, but when a faint, beautiful smile that spread over her pale face, she spoke a little more brightly than normal.

"I see... Ladd said that..."

"I mean, don't take it like he was going to abandon you if you were taken hostage, okay?"

"Don't worry, I understand. ...But even if I became a hindrance to him, and he did whatever he needed to do to remove that hindrance... he would still kill me, so I'd be satisfied."

"Uh... okay."

This chick is a little off too, huh?

Shaft kept his thoughts to himself and made a vague sort of answer, only for Lua's cheeks to redden as she continued.

"But Ladd... he really remembers his promise..."

Apparently she was satisfied with that, because she gave a sigh of relief and watched Ladd fight with entranced eyes.

"Oh... I wish everyone besides Ladd and me would reach the heights of bliss and just quietly pass away... Hee hee, I know that's impossible, but I always

think about it... I really would be better off dead..."

"Please don't say things like that, I have no idea how to respond."

Okay, she's a lot off...

Oblivious to Shaft's opinion, Lua tilted her head, turning her eyes towards the giant bear and the woman sitting astride it.

"Still... isn't that Miria? What is she doing over there?"

↔

"Oh dear, what's going on, I?"

"Looks like the people over there are all that Huey bastard's underlings. Should we take 'em down, me?"

"No, we mustn't attack the Runoratas' guests. Honestly, it would probably be more appropriate to aid them, but young master Carzelio is our first priority right now. Let's collect the bear."

"But we'll need to get the truck here to transport him."

Gabriel and Juliano stopped their bikes for a moment to analyze the sight in front of them.

Just when it had looked like everyone was in a jumbled-up battle, the situation had shifted to a one-on-one death match between a man and a woman, but the sense of bloodlust permeating the area made the brawl seem like the safer situation.

If either the man or the woman had had a firearm, it was likely that there already would have been a death or two from stray bullets.

With that in mind, the twins hoped to prevent any ill effects from reaching Cazze's pet bear, so they were about to dangle some food in front of him to tempt him towards them, but—

"Hey, me, who's that on Cookie's back?"

"I have no idea, I. But they're oddly calm considering that they're riding on a bear, aren't they...?"

"Hey, Miria, what do we do? Why did Ladd and Chané suddenly start

fighting?’

“I wonder if they’re hungry...”

“Oh yeah, they say that hunger is the best spice! And I hear they used to pillage and go to war over salt... The Roman emperor Domi-whatsit even fought about pepper!”

“Really?! Come to think of it, we’ve used pepper and chili to make ourselves a smokescreen before, too!”

As Isaac spouted his slightly-inaccurate facts, Miria just nodded with all her might.

They seemed to be daydreaming as usual, but for once, there was hint of unease in their faces, revealing that they were shaken in their own way.

To Isaac, Ladd was the good friend who had helped him out in Alcatraz; and to Miria, Chané too was a precious friend who had comforted her after she’d cried through the night over Isaac’s arrest.

They’d clung to this bear and made their way to Central Park, but then Ladd had started going wild, and then Chané had shown up and they’d started fighting in hand-to-blade combat. Isaac and Miria were trapped by confusion as they watched.

In their own way, they were doing their best to grasp what was happening; when Isaac offered his guess, it was with a hint of hopefulness in it.

“...What if... they’re not fighting?”

“What do you mean, Isaac?”

“Neither of them are getting hurt, right? Maybe it’s practice for some kind of show...”

In fact, as much as they kept clashing together, the only things that even remotely resembled wounds were the redness at the top of Chané’s nose and the thin cut on Ladd’s throat, and Isaac and Miria couldn’t even see those details from where they were sitting.

And because their movements were so precise, it was natural for those watching to see the battle as extremely beautiful.

"Oh yeah... everyone around them looks like they're from the circus, too!" Miria said as she looked around at the Larvae.

It must have inspired Isaac's confidence in his own explanation, because he nodded firmly and continued.

"Right?! Maybe that noise earlier was the starting bell, and that's why this bear came back to be with all his circus friends?!"

"Does that mean Ladd and Chané are part of the circus, too?"

"Yeah! Maybe this is some kind of duel scene between Romeo and Juliet?! They must've rearranged the story so that Romeo and Juliet could have a boxing-vs.-knife match, and they're adding this opera to the circus!"

"It's *Romeo vs. Juliet!*"

Most of the people in the area couldn't help but hear Isaac and Miria's shouting.

Graham and Christopher heard what they were saying and began to imagine the storyline of *Romeo vs. Juliet*, but it was Ladd who responded to the suggestion most directly from the middle of his fight.

"Ha! Those two never change! Apparently our death match is a show!"

"..."

"Naw, that's just great, why don't we show the world? All the world's a stage, and all the terrorism and revolution that Huey Laforet gets up to is nothing more than a little cheap spice in the newspapers to the people reading about it from far away! All of us secondary characters had better live up to our roles and go round and round and round to twist the whole world off its stem, whaddaya say?!"

"..."

Brushing off Chané's blades as they came at him wordlessly, Ladd asked her something that he'd been wondering.

"...Come to think of it, you know Isaac and that gal?"

"..."

Ladd's words weren't reaching Chané's ears.

Furthermore, Isaac and Miria's shouting wasn't reaching her either, and she hadn't even realized they were there.

Chané had undergone a complete transformation into a system designed to kill Ladd, and she wouldn't stop until either her body ran out of energy or Ladd was dead.

Ladd, for his part, took a twisted pleasure in the fact that that system was nearing completion, and he increased the speed of his own engine as if to prove that all the will and resolve that had created that system would soon go to waste.

The more he added to the noise, the more he, too, became a system designed to destroy his opponent.

Watching them from the sidelines, Graham looked moved as he gazed at the battle.

"Beautiful..." he murmured unthinkingly.

To his eyes, long used to the process of dismantling cars, the battle between Chané and Ladd looked like the parts of two completely different cars fitting together despite their differences.

Their gears fit together perfectly.

But they were running in opposite directions, so the relative strength of their beliefs would decide which way the system turned. As moved as Graham was by the beautiful fight for balance in front of him, he couldn't help but also be nervous wondering which way the gears would turn in the end.

Christopher, too, murmured something much like Graham: "How pretty..."

As an unnatural being, Christopher respected nature, but at this moment, the artificial clash of knife against false hand struck him as a truly beautiful "natural sight."

Like a volcano erupting over a quiet, snow-covered village, the sight was both unbalanced and strangely harmonious, and it moved him.

The others there might not have pictured anything as explicit as those two,

but even they had the sense that this battle was something sacred that they could not intrude upon. Besides, this was already beyond what they could interrupt in a more literal sense.

There was no one who would interrupt.

Of course there wasn't.

Just when everyone was sure of that—

They suddenly cut through the harmony and appeared.

“...?”

The first one to realize the change was the girl in the knit hat.

The member of the Larvae whose talent was spreading poison.

This smell...

Since she used some powdered poisons and poisonous gases, Salomé and the others at Rhythm had **made her sense of smell twice as good as normal**.

The scent that reached the nostrils of this homunculus and test subject was one she didn't often smell among the Larvae.

Why... does it smell like liquor?

Just as Chané and Ladd were about to launch their next attacks—

“Whoa!”

“...?!”

They both suddenly lost their balance and fell forward past each other.

At the same time, they realized:

Some other force had touched them when they were about to come into contact with each other.

Everyone watching could only stare in dumb amazement.

Because while they'd been assuming that no one could break into the battle, all of a sudden a red-faced old man had appeared next to Chané and Ladd—and when it looked like that old man had just lightly touched them, they flew forward almost as though they had rolled forward intentionally.

Ladd and Chané were baffled by suddenly being thrown, but their considerable physical strength allowed them to stop on one knee.

As they got to their feet as fast as possible, the relaxed voice of an old man reached them.

"Hic... Missy, Mister, you drunk in the middle of the day?"

Chané didn't recognize him, but Ladd knew him as of a few days ago.

"Old man... You're Alkie, right?"

Furrowing his brow, Ladd glared at his coworker.

"What're you interfering for? Huh? Are you drunk? I mean, you've been like this the whole time, haven't you?"

The man he'd called Alkie took a sip from the hip flask in his hand and answered, "We're not supposed to fight until we know who our enemies are, remember?"

"Yeah, so that makes this easy! This woman is with Huey Laforet. That means she's with the Runoratas, which means there's nothing to figure out, she's been the enemy from start to finish and everything in between and I've gotta do something about it, don't I, old man?"

"Is that so? In that case..."

As he looked at the old man, Ladd saw Chané get to her feet just a little faster than him at the edge of his vision. She came at him.

Ladd prepared to block the hit, but another shape caught his eye:

The shine of a blade several times longer than the knives in Chané's hand.

"Don't take her down all alone. We can finish this faster if there are a few of us," the old man said, and in that instant, the sharp clash of metal on metal rang through Central Park.

"...!!"

"Ahahahaha! It's been a long time, *amigo!* How've you been?"

Chané blocked the two katanas that suddenly came at her with the knives in her right and left hands.

What she saw before her was a woman who was her complete opposite.

The woman with tanned skin and an ostentatious saloon girl outfit was an assassin that Chané had crossed blades with once before, at Jacuzzi's hideout—Eve Genoard's villa.

"It's been a long time since I got to have a sword fight with you, *amigo*! A lot of things got in our way back then..."

"..."

As Chané took a step back and readied her knives, the katana-wielding saloon girl gave a radiant smile and said, "But this time, you'd better dance with me until the end!"

"Maria... Barcelito...!"

"Wait, Adele. Don't go out there."

Adele readied her pronged spear and tried to leap forward as soon as she saw Maria Barcelito, but Tim yanked her back with a hand on her shoulder.

"But Tim..."

Adele glanced between Tim and Maria, looking reluctant, but her superior shook his head.

"I know how you feel. But we should step back here."

Tim had been watching the flow of the commotion from as far back as he could manage ever since the battle began.

And as soon as he saw Maria, with whom they had a previous connection, appear, he knew that his decision had been the right one.

"It's like some kind of whirlpool out there right now. I realize this sounds a little superstitious, but there's some kind of unpleasant current swirling around out there. If you get involved carelessly, it'll suck you in."

"That's not a logical answer, but... your instincts are usually right," Adele said. She put her spear away and decided to watch the fight from a distance.

The fact was, Tim's prediction would prove correct.

The commotion was about to pull someone even more troublesome onto the

scene.



A few minutes earlier Outside Central Park Inside a car

"I can go, right? I'm going even if you try to stop me. It looks like they've found Cookie, and more importantly, Chané's there."

"...I guess I have no choice."

A miniature transceiver developed by Rhythm sat in the back seat of the car.

When he heard Melvi Dormentaire's voice from the other end, the man sitting in the back seat opened the car door and got out without turning off the transceiver.

Left behind, the driver took the transceiver in hand and asked his own question.

"Is that okay, Mr. Melvi?"

"There's no helping it. We cannot allow Rhythm to be crushed by the city's riffraff here."

"Are those Ladd and Graham fellows really that dangerous?"

"Yes, I watched them fight at Firo Prochainezo's casino the other day... Larvae won't be able to touch them."

In response to Melvi's proclamation, the driver's voice hardened.

"So they are that dangerous... He left without a weapon—will he be all right?"

"Oh yes, don't worry."

"Ladd and Graham themselves proved unable to lay a hand on him that day in the casino."



"Ohh... Ohh, the world of humans nears its end, and beasts lord over the earth. But the final trumpet has not yet sounded, and the apocalypse mocks us... 'O, ye men! What fools! Thou canst not even die! Thou canst not even pray!' it cries to us... They grasp us. They grasp us. Our faith, now become a

living corpse, and the ruins of our former enlightenment eat away out our words and take hold of our entrails..."

Watching the present situation from a distance, the Poet tried to express "this has gotten chaotic" with his pointlessly decorative language, but since Sickle was going at it with Graham at the moment, there was no one to put a stop to the his one-man show.

But then—

Instead of someone showing up to stop him, someone appeared next to him to lend him a hand.

"Don't worry. This chaos will only be sucked into a deeper madness. Or didn't you know? True chaos takes on human form, and the final trumpet takes the form of a gun. I'll ring the funereal bell. I'm no angel, but it may be divine providence for a messenger of death like me to ring the bell for this mad world."

"How can this be? This man is a poet! He whittles away the wrath of the gods and sings a requiem that marks the end of this world and the coming of the new! A fool he is, and yet a hero! Those who choke with fear of the coming of chaos and order will inquire after his name! The death throes smeared in rage! The birthing cries overflowing with joy! All will ask! They will curse his name! They will bless his name!"

"Heh... I'm not important enough to tell you my name, and names have no meaning, but as a signpost to lead on this mad world, I'll leave you something you can carve into a gravestone... My name is Smith. Gunmaestro Smith. Remember my name with a gunshot and take pride in it every time you fear it. And be grateful... that you have not yet gone mad."

As he listened to their conversation, the boy named Mark Wilmans muttered to himself, "...I can't believe these two are just conversing normally..."



Wait, that idiot Smith is here?

Ladd grimaced in wry irritation as he heard Smith's voice from a distance.

Ugh, what an idiot. I'm gonna slug him later.

But he had no time to pay attention to that now.

First he had to beat the shit out of Chané, who was playing with the saloon girl right now, and then he had to break her arms and legs and throw her at Huey's feet.

With such violent images in mind, Ladd stepped even further into the depths of battle.

...Hm?

Suddenly, he felt a prickling, burning sensation on the back of his head.

Something dangerous was coming.

Even as he felt that strange premonition, he wasn't sure whether it was a good one or a bad one. He wouldn't be able to decide until the second it materialized.

And to Ladd Russo, this would be both bad news and wonderful news.

↔

"Hey."

The man lightly appeared on the field and stood behind Salomé.

"Wha...?! What are you..."

As Salomé gaped at him, the man made his "request" with a smile that could be called innocent.

"Sorry, d'you think I could borrow that?"

He was pointing at the portable amplifier that Salomé wore on his back.

↔

"Hey, look, Miria! This must be a circus practice after all!"

"You're right! That girl was doing magic tricks at Jacuzzi's house back then!"

As Isaac and Miria continued their carefree conversation, the eddies of chaos spread further over the area.

"Ahaha! This is so cool! You move even better than the last time we tried to cut each other up, *amigo*!"

Chané answered Maria's dual-wielding attacks with her own two knives.

Just when their blades overlapped as if licking each other, each pressed inwards towards the other's chest, slipping past each other from behind as they tried to slash each other's vitals.

Their movements were as smooth as twins'. As they avoided each other's blades and kicked off the ground to leap into the air, it almost looked like they were performing an intense sword dance.

"Hey, hey, you stay out of this, saloon girl! I was just getting to the good part," Ladd complained, but he wasn't one to insist on a one-on-one fight to begin with, so he wasn't too angry. He did feel as though his prey had been taken away, though, so there was a hint of dissatisfaction to his voice.

In response, Maria showed no sign of holding back. "No good, *amigo*. We're working together for now. I know we're not supposed to move on our own, but it's even worse to keep an enemy all to yourself!"

Watching Maria's brilliant smile, Ladd wondered, *Wait, are the Gandors here?*

He took a look around, and in the distance, he saw someone walking this way from between the park's trees.

That someone was his current employer, Luck Gandor, who appeared to be watching the unfolding situation with a mild expression.

Oh, I get it. He wants to make it seem like they're really going at it with the Runorata Family.

Fine with me. In that case, all we need to do is beat Chané up as a demonstration and wait for Huey and the Runoratas' response.

Which means I can get right back to what I was doing.

As Ladd's vicious smile spread across his face once more, the situation around him began to move again.

Seeing Maria's intrusion, the rest of Larvae had started moving all at once, taking up their weapons and attacking her and the alcohol-soaked man at her

side.

Until then, they'd felt so much pressure from the fight between Chané and Ladd that in the depths of their hearts, they'd thought *there's no way we can interfere*.

But then, right in front of them, the old man and the saloon girl had slipped easily into the battle.

Was their reentry a matter of shame at themselves, or jealousy of the interlopers?

They burst into the center of the whirlpool like a dam breaking, as if to refute what they'd been doing only a few seconds ago.

The only exceptions were the shivering Frank; Tim, watching the situation; Graham and Sickle, who were still facing off; and the Poet and the mysterious man talking to him. The rest of them rushed at the people who appeared to be Chané's "enemies."

"Let's see... *It's just about time for someone to die and make this interesting...*"

That whisper escaped someone's mouth in the midst of the tumult.

But unfortunately, no one heard it.

Because—

BOOM.

An explosive sound suddenly rang through Central Park as though the Earth or the atmosphere itself were shaking.

The mysterious person's whisper, all the shouting, even the grizzly bear's growling—all of it was drowned out and the very liquid in everyone's body seemed to reverberate.

The bear's roar from earlier didn't even come close to it.

The explosive sound could itself be called an attack; those who took the full force of it lost not only their sense of hearing for a moment but even their sight.

How many seconds did it last?

Everyone's guard was down, but enemies and allies alike stood paralyzed.

Even the grizzly bear seemed shocked; unthinkingly, he stood up on his hind legs.

"Wha?!"

"Eeek!"

Isaac and Miria tumbled off his back once more.

The bear looked around, trying to find the source of the sound.

He didn't run off at once—probably in part because he was used to such loud noises after hearing the human cannonball act from the circus, but also because a familiar scent reached his nostrils in the reverberating air.

The scent of an old friend.

And then the grizzly bear spotted him:

The red-haired man he'd spent so much time with in the circus.

"Testing, testing... Can you hear me? Oh, hey, this is pretty loud when you use it normally, huh?"

Salomé's portable speaker dangled from the red-haired man's right hand, and his voice emerged from the megaphone sounding half-impressed and half-annoyed.

"But man, it's that bad at half-volume? ...Salomé, was it? Were you gonna use this on me at full power the other day? C'mon, spare a thought for your surroundings."

People's eardrums were still recovering, so no one heard what he was saying through the megaphone clearly.

A few of them had even taken damage to their inner ears and were feeling dizzy.

But among them, Chané alone immediately understood what was happening.

She couldn't help but understand.

Stop it.

She hated herself for grasping the situation in an instant. She hated herself for not being able to abandon the things she had to abandon so much that it made her heart hurt.

And she pleaded.

Contrary to the warm emotions that welled up in her heart, words of rejection formed in her mind.

Don't come.

Just this once, don't help me.

But the wall of ice that she had built in her heart melted in an instant when she saw the man before her eyes, his hair as red as flame.

If you come, I'll relax.

I'll... lose my desire to kill.

"Don't worry, Chané. You can just be yourself."

The man with the red hair received her desperate request and, as if to embrace it all the more, let his own words ring through the speaker.

"I love you however you are, and for better or worse, I don't think your dad's opinion will change much either!"



The next one to understand the situation was Ladd Russo.

The premonition that had been prickling on the back of his head had been exactly right.

"You redhead bastaaaaaaard!" he shouted, ignoring the ringing in his ears, as a vein in his forehead started to twitch. "Are you trying to recreate the scene from **back then**? Did you sit back and wait for the perfect timing? Were you planning to burst into the scene just when she was in a pinch? Waiting until one wrong move coulda killed her just because you were so sure that you'd never mess up the timing, huh?!"

At that, the redhead man—Claire Stanfield, currently calling himself Felix—gave a beaming smile full of self-confidence and answered through the speaker.

"You got it! I'd never mess up my timing. But in this case, I came running as soon as I saw Chané. Which must mean the world and destiny itself are already tailor-made for me, just so I could show up with perfect timing."

Snap. Snap. The sound of something breaking echoed inside of Ladd.

Was it his blood vessels, or his muscles tearing after being pushed to the max?

Ladd felt the pain, but he subsumed it into his own anger and went to run at Claire, but—

"Wait, Ladd Russo."

"..."

He stopped unthinkingly, startled at suddenly being called by his full name.

He wasn't afraid. He was just curious as to what kind of bullshit his opponent would spit out next.

Depending on what he said, there was a chance it would push his anger even higher.

"I've got something to say to you and anyone else who's got a bone to pick with Huey Laforet, Melvi Dormentaire, or the Runorata Family."

"...?"



Gabriel and Juliano, as members of the Runorata Family, just looked at each other.

"Well, what do you think he has to say, I?"

"Hell if I know. My ears are still ringing, me."

They knew he was Melvi's bodyguard, but couldn't yet guess at what he might say here.

But then, without waiting for his next words, Cookie the bear dashed towards Claire.

At some sort of symbol from Claire, Cookie bent over so that he could climb atop his back.

Then, straddling that giant furry back, Claire pointed his free hand at the sky and made his *declaration*.

"Tomorrow!"

"?"

Every gaze was concentrated on the redheaded man.

"Tomorrow, at the casino party at Ra's Lance, my employer Melvi Dormentaire is having a showdown with Firo Prochainezo of the Martillo Family. I will be stationed as a bodyguard outside of that room to make sure that no one interferes."

As he spouted top-secret information without a care in the world, Claire made his lines shine as though he were singing a line in a musical—though Central Park was a little removed from Broadway.

"If you want to humiliate or kill me, just try to interfere with that showdown, all you secondary characters. If you're scared of me, don't come near that building. That's an easy enough rule, right?"

There was nary a cloud over his words.

He may have meant them as a deliberate challenge, but he had no conception that he might've said something wrong.

"I won't run or hide. I'll just take you on at my full strength."

"You bastard..."

After a glance at Ladd, who sounded like he was about to explode with anger, Claire let loose a few words that were meant to be provoking.

"Of course, you could always cause a fuss here and get yourself arrested by the police."

"...Whaa?"

"It'd make a nice excuse to escape me. I won't stop you—frankly, I recommend it!"

"-----"

Ladd's overflowing anger surpassed his ability to form words.

He pushed that anger out from his core to his extremities and, regardless of the fact that his opponent was straddling a giant bear, bounded forward.

An inhuman leap.

His legs, pushed past their limit, screamed, but Ladd didn't care as he swung his steel hand towards his redheaded enemy with an unheard cry.

The threat posed by the three-meter-tall bear wasn't even registering as an obstacle to him anymore.

But—

The bear was still a bear.

"...!!"

Hit by something from the side, Ladd's body flew through the air.

"...?!"

He hadn't taken any serious damage, but Ladd understood that his charge had been blown aside by some kind of force.

On the other hand, everyone who had been watching Ladd's charge immediately knew what had happened.

The bear, realizing that something was coming at it with murderous intent,

had swung its paw at him with all the speed of a mousetrap.

His claws had all been filed down, since he was Cazze's pet, but the sharpness of a bear's claws are not the only terrifying thing about it. Its physical strength alone is enough of a threat to a human.

Chances were high that a single serious swipe from even a normal, two-meter-tall bear—even if it was just the pads of its paws—could be fatal to a human.

The impact could break a man's neck or back.

But Cookie was well-trained, and he softened the power of his blow right before it hit so that it could push Ladd away rather than trying to break him.

The members of the circus had had a lot of enemies, and they'd been attacked by mobs more than once or twice—so the animal trainer, Parrot, had taught the bear how to incapacitate enemies without killing them.

"Aww, Cookie, I'll be fine. Don't worry about it."

Claire flipped the speaker's switch off and patted the bear's head, smiling.

"Sorry, this guy's got a habit of blowing away anyone who comes at him with an intention to kill."

Claire summed it up as a "habit," maybe because it would be too much trouble to explain the animal trainer's techniques.

Ladd got to his feet, a vein in his forehead pulsing. "Oh, is that so? ...Nah, I don't really mind the bear. Animals are just tryin' to stay alive after all... The bear didn't do anything wrong."

"Great! Then we're all good."

"But ya know... I *do* think his owner should be held responsible, you know? Sitting there thinking there's no chance he can die while he keeps that big, dangerous bear... Why don't I discipline his owner, huh? Huh?!"

Apparently under the impression that Claire was the bear's owner, Ladd cracked his neck and took one step forward—

"I'd like you to stop right there, please."

"You don't want me to blow your head off, right?"

A gun aimed at him from either side.

Gabriel and Juliano suddenly had Ladd flanked.

"...? The hell do you two want?" Ladd asked with a scowl.

The twins answered.

"If you intend to inflict harm upon that bear's owner, you are an enemy of the Runorata Family. You seem like someone who understands what that means."

"So here's the deal, we'll let you go now if you get the hell out of here."

As he heard the answers that they gave him in their different tones, the corners of Ladd's mouth turned up with delight.

"Ohh, that's just great, 'cause you guys were always my enemies to begin with."

There was a gun pointed at him from either side. And naturally, these two were not amateurs who had lined up their sights such that they'd hit each other if they shot; they were aimed diagonally to each other.

But Ladd's confidence didn't waver.

"Perfect. All I did was live the way I wanted to and all my infuriating enemies keep coming at me one after another. This is like if a different Moriarty came to Holmes's front door every day. This is great! Yeah! My life is just coming up roses! You want me to add one of those roses to your life...?"

There, he loosened up his body and started his boxer-like footwork.

"I'll make it out of your red blood!"

And then—a gunshot rang out.

It wasn't from the guns that the twins had cocked.

Hearing the gunshot from behind him, Ladd put some distance between himself and the twins and looked towards the sound.

He saw a man in glasses and ragged clothes standing there.

The man who had been at the hospital—the type of person Ladd hated.

The man—Victor Talbot—raised the barrel of his gun from the ground to the sky and shouted at the top of his lungs to everyone present.

“Listen up, you bastards! You have some nerve, going at it right in front of a BOI agent!”

The BOI.

Hearing that word, a few people looked at each other, but the majority of them just tilted their heads.

What’s a BOI agent doing here?

Why are his clothes all torn up?

Many of the people currently gathered in Central Park had reason to consider the BOI a troublesome foe, but right now, a single agent wasn’t much of a threat.

But that gunshot was a different story.

Chances were that Central Park was currently sealed off by the Runoratas or Huey or something. But if anyone in the area heard that gunshot, the police officers who’d been mobilized to reclaim the bear might come rushing into the park.

In fact, there were a few people in police uniforms at the entrance of the park right now, trying to see what was going on.

“Whoops, I had no idea—there’s a BOI agent here. Careful, Cookie, better not fight anymore. He might shoot you!”

Almost as if he understood Claire’s words, the bear seemed to nod and then crouched in place.

Seeing that, Claire raised his voice and addressed everyone again.

“This is all a bit of a mess, but in the end it’s pretty simple, right? You’re either on the side of me and Huey and the Runoratas, or you’re on our enemies’ side.”

Even before he spoke, battle lines began to be drawn in the park.

The twins and Chané gathered by the bear, and the Larvae stood around them as though to protect them.

Lined up opposite were Ladd, Graham, and the assassins hired by the Gandors.

Lua and Shaft (who were still safe inside the car), Victor (who was bright red), and Isaac and Miria didn't take either side.

"What's he talking about? They're splitting into camps, is this some kind of Olympics?"

"Like in Los Angeles! Or Lake Placid!"

"Or maybe tomorrow's the circus's main event, Miria!"

"Oh, I bet you're right! Tomorrow's the last day of the casino event, too!"

As if to answer the two of them, the final neutral party opened his mouth and stepped forward.

"That's right! Tomorrow's going to be quite a party! You can take your pick of magicians and con men and wizards and clowns! I think the whole city will be in on the party!"

"Really? Then are you gonna do something, as a magician?"

"Oh my gosh, I'm so excited, Isaac!"

As their eyes sparkled, the man they'd called a magician gave a wide grin and a nod.

"Oh yes, I plan to enjoy it with everything I've got. You'd better enjoy tomorrow's show too!"

And the man—Christopher Shouldered—stepped forward with Ricardo, headed for Ladd's side.

"Huh...?"

The members of Larvae looked uneasy, but Christopher opened his mouth with a wide smile.

And confirmed that their unease was right on the mark.

"I'm going **over here**. If we fight tomorrow, good luck!"

"Wha...?!"

As they all stared, speechless, Christopher clapped his hands together and pointed at the man sitting astride the bear.

"Oh, right! Hey, everyone from Larvae! This redhead young man and I actually fought a few years ago, and he won. He kicked my butt, actually. I couldn't even stand. It was really impressive, so you'd better praise him!"

In response, Claire's eyes lit up, and he said to the surrounding Larvae members, "What did I tell you! I wasn't lying! All right, go ahead and praise me to your heart's content!"

But the tattooed woman just brushed him off with, "Later."

"Later? Well, we are in the middle of things. I guess can wait a little. I'm pretty good at reading the atmosphere."

As the vast majority of people present stifled the urge to shout, "Liar!" the Larvae's unease only grew.

"...Are you turning against us because this man is on our side, Chris?"

When Sickle spoke up as their representative, Christopher shook his head slightly.

"No, no, it's got nothing to do with whether he's there or not."

"Then why? Are you trying to betray Master Huey?!"

"No, not that either! It's just, I'm still on leave, right?" Christopher answered with a smile reminiscent of a mischievous child, then shrugged. "I guess it has to do with not turning down your friend's requests for help? Oh, just for the record, Rail's probably gonna be on **this side** too."

"What do you mean?!"

"Well, speaking for myself, I don't want to imagine anything as savage as trying to kill you. But you know, Sickle and Chi and Adele, and Liza, wherever you're listening from—you already knew I was this kind of person, didn't you?"

Then, as though he'd thought of a brilliant strategy, Christopher's eyes lit up and he said, "I've got it! Why don't all of you come to this side too?! Then everything will work out!"

"Stop screwing around! That would mean acting against Master Huey!"

"...Are you sure about that?" Christopher asked, his smile disappearing.

Sickle furrowed her brow. "What?"

"My enemy, personally, is Melvi. So that redhead bodyguard of his is my enemy, right? ...Oh, forget it. I don't think we have time to explain more than that."

Christopher turned his gaze towards the countless police officers running in their direction.

"...Withdraw!"

At Salomé's command, the Larvae members gave one last reluctant look at Christopher and fled the scene.

Frank looked noticeably concerned when he looked at Christopher, so Christopher reassured him, "Don't worry, Rail's fine." Hearing that, Frank too disappeared from the scene with a speed that was unexpected given his giant body.

"Tch... what, can't these wimps stand a few cops?"

"What should we do, Boss Ladd?"

"I've got no business with the kind of cops who've shown up planning to fight a bear."

So they, too, made their way quickly to the car where Lua waited.

Ladd took one last glance at the bear's back, an enormous bloodlust roiling deep in his heart.

"...That's just fine. I'll accept your little challenge."

The target of that bloodlust, Claire, just offered his hand to Chané, who was standing next to Cookie.

"Let's go, Chané."

"..."

Chané glared at him, silent. There was no killing intent in her gaze, but there

was an unmistakable hostility.

She clearly had no intention of riding on the bear, but at a signal from Claire, Cookie handily threw her onto his back.

"?!"

And then Cookie began running.

The twins started their bikes and rode behind him as if chasing them.

"You think this counts as getting out of this unscathed, me?"

"Well, we'll see. If his challenge succeeds, we may be better off not calling Cazze to the casino tomorrow night... Honestly, telling his opponents where his charge plans to be... there are some truly terrible bodyguards in this world, aren't there, I?"

Was it years of experience and training that allowed Chané to ride Cookie—who was running as fast as a car—without losing her balance?

"..."

As Chané continued to glare at Claire, he offered an honest apology.

"I'm sorry I interrupted you. You were trying to bring your past self back, right?"

"...!"

"It's just, your dad's not looking for you to never change, you know? I think he wants you to keep changing. He seems to really like experiments and changes, after all."

"..."

Chané was clearly shaken; not only had Claire guessed her intention, but he'd gently denied its necessity as well. But looking at her, Claire only gave her a smile overflowing with self-confidence and nodded.

"Don't worry. I love you however you are, Chané."

"..."

Chané fell into a sullen silence, but most of her earlier hostility had faded.

Watching her and thinking how cute she was like that, Claire voiced his thoughts.

“Man, Chané, you really do look like your parents.”

“...?”

Chané had never known her mother, so Claire’s proclamation was deeply unsettling—but she wasn’t prepared for a heart-to-heart with Claire right now, so she let it go.

Never realizing that her mother was in New York City that very moment.

↔

“Uhh... are you all right, Agent Talbot?”

Victor Talbot, still wearing his torn-up clothes, had been apprehended by the New York police force as “a suspicious man with a gun.”

Glaring at Bill and Donald for their late arrival, Victor clicked his tongue and answered, “Does it look like I’m alright? My body’s fine, but my pride is in tatters, you asshole.”

“You have my deepest sympathies.”

“If you’re sympathetic, then get to work. We need to prepare to coordinate with the police. Use this little mistaken arrest to force their hand.”

“What are you planning to do, Agent Talbot?”

At Donald’s question, Victor’s eyes gleamed behind his broken glasses.

“I just found out that all the criminals are gonna gather in one place for us tomorrow... Huey’s bound to make an appearance, too. ...Whatever happens, the BOI and the police have got to take control of it in the end.”

And after giving that order, Victor added something for them to be careful of.

About the man who, in one sense, could become this incident’s greatest dark horse.

“Don’t let Senator Beriam find out, you hear me? There’s no telling what that fastidious senator would get up to in order to clean up the city...”

↔

Evening The Martillos' underground casino

"Let's see... time to get ready, I guess."

In a few hours, the second night of the casino party at Ra's Lance would begin.

Since Firo was in charge of opening his room, he wanted to arrive early to prepare things.

His real purpose was the confrontation with Melvi, but given that he still didn't even know what the confrontation would entail, he intended to do his best at the casino party so as not to sully the Martillos' name.

His ultimate goal of rescuing Ennis never left his mind for a second.

But there was nothing he could do right now, and he understood well that he might endanger her if he rushed into things.

"...The goal today is to figure out if I can see through any of his movements..."

Thinking of how Ennis was still held captive honestly had him on edge.

It made him remember the time when, as a child, he'd been abducted and held captive by a pervert.

If Keith and his dad had just been a little slower to save me, I...

Firo recalled the particulars of that traumatic incident. Usually that made him go pale, but now it only sharpened his resolve.

If you put Ennis through something like that...

Then it won't matter who you are, Melvi Dormentaire.

His heart as calm as undisturbed water, Firo only polished the knife that would stab into his opponent's vitals in his heart.

He honed an anger that was wholly unlike Ladd's.

And as he did, he remembered long ago.

This is familiar.

I haven't felt this disturbed... since that Phantom Father kidnapped Keith years

ago.

Iron stakes for the bad, candy for the good.

A serial killer had been stalking New York with that motto, and as a Mafia boss and a symbol of the evil in New York City, Keith had been abducted.

I was able to chase him off thanks to Claire, but I let him get away...

Now that I think about it, though... that priest might've been an Immortal.

No, wait a second.

I've... got his memories...? His own knowledge...?

Unlocked by his recognition, information about the Phantom Father flowed forth from beyond the border of Firo's own memories.

He... he was in Szilard's memories... goddammit! What the hell? He was connected to Szilard?

At the same time, the “information” that was the memories of the priest-turned-serial-killer flowed forth as well.

.....

He really thought he was saving the world by killing people...

Firo didn't know how to feel about the memories of the enemy he'd nearly forgotten, or the knowledge of how he met his end that had come flowing into him.

He wondered if maybe Melvi had a justified reason to hate him.

...Even so.

Firo was not self-sacrificing enough for that thought to make his heart waver.

Even if he's kidnapped Ennis for the sake of world peace... That's all it is. That's not a reason to forgive him.

But I'm glad he's an asshole. It'll feel good to take him down.

With a wry smile at his own selfish way of looking at things, Firo sat down to organize his bag.

But then he heard the door at the top of the stairs open.

Are Christopher and Ricardo back?

Firo stood up to give them orders to pass on to Jacuzzi's gang.

But—the person who appeared from the stairs was neither Christopher nor Ricardo, nor any of the members of the Martillo Family.

"You..."

The person began to speak to Firo—

And the flow of fate shifted once again.



A Runorata villa Melvi's room

"Now you've done it."

Having heard the whole story, Melvi sighed and asked his bodyguard, "Why would you do something like that?"

"Couldn't be helped, it was the best way to protect you."

"...What?"

"It's better if all your enemies are gathered in one spot. There's only one of me, you know? It'll be easier if I can take them all on at once rather than having 'em be split up."

How arrogant can you get?

He spoke as though it were the most natural thing in the world, to Melvi's aggravation. But at the same time, Melvi knew his strength, and he wasn't able to deny Claire's logic.

"This isn't just about being your bodyguard. ...You seem to think this is just about the fight between you and Firo, but if that were the case, you should've just laid in wait for him in some dark alley."

"..."

"This is because you wanted to beat him down in front of a crowd and show off your own strength. And now I've simplified that for you, right?"

Melvi peered at the man who spoke with the certainty that he was right, his

brow furrowed.

"Anyway, I'm worried about you. I don't know whether you'll make it through two more days alive."

"...? Isn't making sure I stay alive your job?"

"Not quite. My job is to make eliminate anything that would stop you from carrying out your plan. If, while you were in the middle of your plan for your showdown with Firo, he happened to kill you, I'd be hands-off about that."

Then, his light tone vanishing, Claire continued with a serious expression.

"I'm not showing a preference 'cause he's my friend or anything. If you *really* wanted me to protect you from him, I wouldn't even bring you to Ra's Lance tomorrow. I'd just go save his girlfriend, and then I'd ship you off to Alaska until he cools down. And by 'he,' I mean Firo."

"You say you're not showing a preference, but don't you think you're overestimating him? Do you really think I'm so beneath Firo?"

"Well, yeah. What, didn't you realize that? I totally thought you were going for the underdog thing with him."

Claire answered without a moment's hesitation. A muscle in Melvi's cheek twitched.

"What makes you think I can't beat a man who wastes his life in a tiny little organization like that one?"

At that, Claire's face went blank, and he stared straight into Melvi's face.

"I'm gonna give you a warning."

"..."

"This world is mine, and I don't believe I'll ever die. I don't intend to ever lose a fight or to back down from what I think is right."

Melvi was confused because Claire suddenly started talking about himself, but Claire continued without noticing.

"But listen, if I ever went funny in the head and tried to hurt Chané or the Gandors... I think Firo's the only one who'd be able to stop me."

“...”

The unexpected turn of the conversation only confused Melvi further.

It was surprising enough that a man who believed he was the strongest person in the world had ever considered losing to someone, and on top of that, it was an Immortal who just happened to have a little skill with a knife?

Furthermore, there was a strong possibility that Claire didn't even know Firo was an Immortal. Which would mean that he might be thinking that Firo could surpass him as a normal human.

“What reason do you have to think so highly of Firo Prochainezo?”

“I don't even think Firo's figured that out. I'm under no obligation to explain the details to you.”

Claire blew Melvi off and then explained what he most wanted to tell him.

“I'm just saying, that's my warning to you since I'm guarding you. No matter how perfect of a job I do, if you're gonna chug poison on your own, that's outside my job description. That's something for a doctor to take care of.”

“I really don't understand you. You seem to think highly of both him and the Gandors, but they don't seem that impressive to me at all.”

“Well, if you wanna think it's just personal fondness, that's fine with me. But I warned you, alright?”

And just in case, Claire repeated those words one last time.

Not to pester Melvi, but because he truly believed it was his duty as his bodyguard.

“Firo is someone who could defeat me. Don't forget it.”

1935-D Luckstreet Boys, Connecting Chapter: There Has to be Something There

Ra's Lance Underground Restaurant

And so the second night of the casino party began.

“Nngh, Niiice... Do we really have to go?”

“Jacuzzi... it’s one thing to say that back at our place or in front of the building, but don’t you think it’s strange to say it here?”

The teary-eyed Jacuzzi was standing right in the entryway to the casino hall.

Since they would stand out if they all entered at once, they had decided to all enter at different times, starting with Nick and some of the others.

They’d be able to spot Donny right away, given his giant size, but since everyone was wearing tuxedoes and dresses, it was hard to tell their friends apart from strangers at a single glance.

Jacuzzi had been wiped out after his hard work the previous night and slept into the evening, so Nice tried to cheer him up.

“You know, Jacuzzi, it may be a lucky thing that you slept so late today. It sounds like a bear appeared in Central Park this afternoon, and the police had quite a time of it.”

“A b-bear?!”

“If you’d woken up early and gone out for a walk, you might have gotten involved in the incident. So you were lucky! Let’s ride that wave and win big

tonight at the casino, shall we?”

Nice didn’t usually speak as formally with Jacuzzi as she did with the rest of the gang, but since she was wearing such a nice dress tonight, she spoke to him with the air of a young lady.

Jacuzzi thought she was really pretty like that, but he didn’t have the courage to say that to her face, so instead he slipped deeper and deeper into negative thoughts.

“I wonder if they caught the bear... Or maybe they shot it... What if they shot it and now it hates humans and it comes back as a ghost? I don’t think I could beat a ghost bear if it attacked me...”

Spouting words that could only sound like a joke, Jacuzzi started looking nervously around, genuinely making sure there were no ghost bears.

Watching him fondly, Nice took his hand and led him around the hall.

“Let’s go! We’re just exploring the place again today, but let’s really show off while we play, shall we?”

“Ah—aaah—Nice, waaait!”

A lone figure watched their retreating backs with his brow furrowed.

“H-hey, didn’t those guys say they were broke? What’re they doing here? Were they here yesterday, too?!?”

Dallas Genoard had snuck in, disguised with a fake beard out of fear of the Gandors.

“Goddammit... just what the hell are they up to? If they’ve found a way to make enough cash to go wild here, as their landlord I’d better help myself to some of that...”

He really wanted to grill them on it then and there, but if he stood out, he might get himself spotted by the Gandors.

Dallas clicked his tongue internally and took a long glance down at the floor, looking for a table he’d be sure to win at.

Of course, there was no table where a guest was sure to win to begin with.

↔

Melvi Dormentaire was in a bad mood.

Given that he lived behind a shield made of his pride, Claire Stanfield's remark that he was inferior to Firo had stuck him like a thorn, and the unbearable humiliation was eating away at him.

He had the self-confidence that comes of believing he had been chosen.

The pride he took in having the Dormentaire's protection at his back gave him confidence, and eventually that had transformed into the belief that he was, quite literally, a special being.

In fact, Melvi felt that all humans except for a select few were nothing more than pawns for him to use.

He viewed other Immortals and "abnormals" like Claire as an exception to this rule, but even so, he was sure that he would hold the reins in the end.

Having Huey's right hand on his head and that line from Claire had both been humiliating, and it was true that he had even felt fear in the former case.

But in acknowledging that, he still believed that he would stand above them in the end.

Szilard Quates.

The genius alchemist who had once tried to take control of the world.

And the man who had inherited his memories.

Melvi knew that what he lacked, more than anything else, was "experience."

So he wanted all of the "experience" that Szilard had gathered up more than anything else.

Since Szilard desired youth and Melvi desired experience, their consciousnesses would have melded together much like Sham; they would have become perfect.

But Szilard was gone.

Only his enormous store of knowledge remained, inside the brain of a punk named Firo.

Seething with murderous intent towards Firo, who even now was probably somewhere in this same building, Melvi lavished smiling compliments on the suckers in front of him.

Tomorrow's the last time I'll have to suck up to people like this.

Gambling? Testing your luck? Don't make me laugh.

You people lost your bets the instant you were born.

Perhaps as an effect from the Lord Avaro—who had provided the source of his body—Melvi had always had a tendency to look down on people. But at this moment, Melvi was thinking those things particularly strongly in an attempt to brush off the fear he'd felt towards Huey and the humiliation he'd received from Claire.

They're all the same, every one of them.

Melvi shrugged internally, his “gentlemanly young dealer” face stuck firmly in place.

He was currently in charge of an utterly normal poker table.

But there was nothing normal about Melvi’s skill.

To put it bluntly, he was cheating.

He cut the cards in a natural-looking way, but in truth, he was skillfully controlling the flow of the cards, playing the part of a table that looked easy to win at from first glance but then wringing every last cent out of the boastful gamblers.

Watching the various emotions of the guests who came by without any idea of what he was up to, Melvi was overcome with a sadistic sense of superiority.

The people who walked off whining about good or bad luck, never realizing everything was planned from the start, were almost unbearably laughable.

Behind his gentle smile, Melvi felt a stickier smile, immersed in a sense of hubris—until suddenly, something caused a change in the current.

“Hey, remember me?”

Someone called out to the dealer—Melvi—as he sat down at the table.

“You’re—yes.”

He didn’t remember the man’s face, but he did remember that distinctive false hand.

It was distinctive in the same way as Ladd Russo, who was on the Runoratas’ watchlist.

This was the man he’d spotted at Firo Prochainezo’s casino and used to aggravate Firo.

It was true that he’d used him, but as far as Melvi was concerned, he was nothing more than a fallen stone he’d picked up along the road to throw at Firo.

What was he doing here?

As Melvi questioned him in his heart, the man with the false hand toyed with a few of the highest value orange chips in the palm of his real hand.

“I won big at the slots thanks to you.”

With obvious antagonism in his smile, the man with the false hand narrowed his eyes and glared at Melvi.

“I thought I’d come return the favor.”

This is odd.

Is this really the same guy as that scaredy-cat?

Well, whatever. I don’t know what you’re scheming, but if you wants to hand me your money, I’ll gladly take it.

I’m allowed to cheat, but don’t think I’ll let scum like you get away with it.

Even seeing his high-value orange chips, Melvi looked down on him.

He was nothing more than a lone, pathetic human with nothing special about him, not even Immortal, just caught up in something much bigger than himself.

Unaware of Melvi’s thoughts, the man with the false hand looked around at the area that the Runoratas controlled.

"I see... you've got a few kinds of poker, some blackjack, baccarat, roulette wheels... but no slot machines?"

"They're terrible to carry in, you see. Please, play at any table you'd like."

"Thanks... I plan to take my time here tonight."

Later, Carlotta—watching the scene as a customer and eating with the twin bodyguards—would say this: "Melvi was certainly looking down on his opponent.

"But I'll tell you this... he didn't lower his guard.

"I can say that much for his honor, which in thirty short minutes was transformed into clownish antics."



Thirty minutes later

"Everyone's making a fuss over there... Could it be the ghost bear...?"

As Jacuzzi spoke, his face going white, an exasperated Nice only pulled him along.

"Those aren't screams, Jacuzzi; they're cheers. It sounds like they're coming from the Runoratas' area..."

"Eek?! Th-the Runoratas?! I'm scared, Nice, let's not go..."

Jacuzzi teared up, but once Nice pulled him over he saw a pair of familiar faces and calmed down a little.

"Hey, Jacuzzi! You're here!"

"And Nice is with you!"

In response to Isaac and Miria's warm greetings, Nice asked about the thing that had caught her attention.

"We heard a big fuss. Do you know what's going on?"

Nice tried to peek into the center of the cheering crowd, but there were quite

a lot of people gathered there, and she couldn't get a good look.

In response, Isaac and Miria explained the situation enthusiastically.

"Well, do you know Nader?! He's Ladd's friend and Miss Genoard's standin!"

"Apparently Nader just won a huge showdown and made fifty thousand dollars!"

"Fifty thous...?!"

Just hearing that amount was enough to make Jacuzzi pass out.

Even with the low prices resulting from the Depression, fifty thousand dollars was a lot of money.

The weekly salary of a special investigator during Prohibition was between fifty and one hundred dollars, so one could say it was a huge amount of money to make in one night of gambling.

On the other hand, at his best Al Capone has been said to have made between a hundred million and three million dollars in a years, so it could be called chump change compared to that.

Was it was an enormous sum or chump change?

The answer of that was visible on the face of the man in the center of the crowd.

Melvi Dormentaire stared into space as though time had stopped.

The man across from him with a mountain of chips piled up before him raised his false hand to answer the people's cheers.

Most people—Nice and Jacuzzi among them—had no way of knowing what had just happened at that table.

But before they could learn the particulars—

The name of one gambler spread among the casino party participants like wildfire.

Nader Schasscule.

The curtain rose there and then on the legend of the hero who saved the fallen Genoard family.



A few hours later Beriam manor

“There’s been an irregularity.”

“Apparently a man won a rather astronomical sum from one of the Runorata tables. Given that he’s dealt a fair amount of damage to the Runoratas, a number of places have started keeping an eye on him.”

At Senator Manfred Beriam’s words, Spike, who was sitting on the room’s sofa, gave a delighted laugh.

“Huh, so there really are people who don’t know what’s good for them out there. If it was just a spot of good fortune, he’s actually pretty unlucky considering what he’s got coming to him next. The unluckiest he’s ever been in his life.”

Spike laughed and made a vulgar comment about helping himself to the guy’s money if he were wiped out, but— Beriam’s next words wiped the smile off his face.

“Nader Schasscule. That’s the name of your lucky, unlucky man.”

“Uh, what?”

“Apparently he was one of the Lemures with you long ago.”

“...Huh?”

No no no, wait just a minute here.

What did Mr. Beriam just dump on me?

“That can’t be. He...”

“He lived. That’s all there is to it. I never told you, but he’s the one who

informed on the Lemures.”

“...”

The man he was so sure he killed was actually alive.

That would have been enough of a shock, but now Beriam was telling him that he was the most watched man at the casino party.

“This timing is suspicious. There might be something there. I want you to clear up everything about him—who’s backing him, what he wants. If a little effort can’t make his interests line up with ours, we may have to consider wiping him out.”

Beriam spoke disinterestedly, but Spike just shook his head slowly, a dazed look on his face.

“That’s... impossible.”

And as he remained frozen there, the sound of a gunshot reach Spike’s ears.

It was the sound of his own pupil practicing at the shooting range, but right now, it sounded much more distant than normal to Spike.

And the girl performing her normal practice with a sniper rifle—Sonja—had no idea yet.

That her friend, who she believed had become a hero, was so near to her now in so many ways.

Or that he was a con man trying to fool the world so that they would call him a hero.

1935-D Luckstreet Boys, Connecting Chapter (Reverse): We Have No Tomorrow

One day later Somewhere in New York Reservoir

Manhattan's source of water is said to be the plentiful runoff from snow thawing in the mountains to the north of New York City.

The water flows dozens of miles from Croton Dam and the Catskill Mountains, through canals and waterways, to reach reservoirs in Manhattan.

At one time, a private company controlled the canals, but the city bought them in 1932, and from that point on the water that provided for the livelihood of the areas around Manhattan was under direct municipal control.

In one such reservoir.

Two figures stood in the facility that held the majority of Manhattan's water supply.

"Are we... really going to do this?"

It was Salomé Carpenter who spoke up to make sure.

The man he spoke to was one with bandages wrapped over one eye—Huey Laforet.

"Yes, that is my purpose here, after all. The eyes of the BOI and the Mafia alike are fixed on Ra's Lance right now. ...I think Firo and Melvi are having their showdown about now."

"I heard there was a spot of trouble yesterday and **an additional guest** has been invited to the contest?"

"Apparently, yes. He's someone Liza and Chané both have a history with... It sounds like Melvi has it rough, doesn't it?" Huey said, standing in front of the water pumps in the darkness of the night. "Even Manhattan used to be built around a well, long ago. But when disease began to spread, they built these canals all at once... It makes me rather nostalgic."

"It's quite moving to hear you say such things, sir, given that you were alive to see that change."

"Let's see... I'm curious about what Professor Renee and Fermet are up to, but at the very least, I can be sure that Professor Renée isn't here."

As he spoke, Huey straightened and slowly began to walk forward.

Looking at the bottle gripped in Huey's hand, Salomé gulped and said, "...So it's really about to start... a time of evolution."

"You never know. It could result in devolution instead."

Huey gave a wry smile and took one more step forward—

But then a footstep that was different from Huey's echoed through the reservoir.

At first Huey thought he'd imagined it; but even when he stopped walking, the *clack, clack* of footsteps continued to echo around them.

"..."

"Who's there?!"

Huey narrowed his eyes and peered into the darkness where the sound had come from, while Salomé cried out nervously, certain that all of the reservoir workers had been put to sleep.

But no one answered Salomé's cry, and the footsteps only came closer and closer.

And then—the figure finally reached the circle of light created by the lantern they'd brought.

"...?"

Huey didn't recognize the man.

He looked to be in his late fifties or mid-sixties.

Out of his deeply wrinkled face peered a pair of eyes that, at first glance, appeared gentle.

The man eyed Huey, shrugged, and spoke.

"You... must be Mr. Huey Laforet, is that right?"

The man stopped walking and spoke with an amicable air to his voice.

"I hear you're a hundred and fifty years older than I am. But I'm the more elderly. This world of ours is a fascinating place—don't you think so?"

"Yes, I'm certainly never bored."

"Are you sure you shouldn't be over at Ra's Lance? Aren't all of your darling subordinates over there?"

Hearing that, Huey understood that this man was not only someone who knew about Immortals, but someone connected to the casino party incident as well.

And then, gazing at him as though to test him, Huey answered the question of man who was both more elderly and younger than himself.

"They are all in that building so that I may be here. ...And yet someone like you has managed to come here instead. Still... should I say that I've lost this gamble?"

"Life certainly is a gamble. There's always a chance that everything can turn around in an instant, but some people keep losing all their lives. Unlike at a casino, though, victory can be won through hard work."

After saying that much, the old man shrugged and then shook his head from side to side.

"But let's leave good luck and bad luck to the younglings out on the street. People like you and I who have stepped off the path aren't dealing with luck anymore; we're better suited to karmic retribution. There's nowhere left for us on Luck Street."

Hearing those words, Huey finally narrowed down who he was speaking to.

The man standing in front of him was certainly elderly. But there was no sign that he was washed up.

Quite the reverse—he exuded a certain pressure that might overwhelm the young, much like Bartolo Runorata.

Chuckling lightly, Huey said to him, “Am I sure I shouldn’t be at Ra’s Lance...? I think that’s something I should be asking you.”

“Is it?”

“Aren’t your own precious subordinates risking their lives in a gamble right now?” Huey stood directly in front of the old man and spoke his name with a certain degree of respect. “Isn’t that right... Mr. Molsa Martillo?”

His name spoken, Molsa Martillo’s mouth twisted in a smile and spoke to Huey, who was many times his senior.

“If I don’t need to introduce myself, shall we just get started?”

“With what?”

“With the gamble known as ‘negotiations.’”

With a self-mocking smile, Molsa walked forward once more.

“But there’s no luck here, good or bad. This is all a matter of karma. It’s a simple gamble, one in which all of the chips could become retribution in an instant.”

“For people like us who have strayed from the path... that’s only fitting, isn’t it?”



The third night of the casino party.

New York City was wrapped in a feverish passion for gambling.

Some bet money, or their pride, or even their lives, and they all flung themselves into gambling.

But soon that, too, would end.

Now that all the cards had been dealt and were being revealed— The final *baccano* centered on Ra's Lance was about to begin.

バッカーノ!

1935-D 完

JOKER



JOKER

Go to
BACCANO!
1935 END & EPILOGUE

1935-D Luckstreet Boys: Afterword

Afterword

Long time no see, this is Narita! Man, it's *really* been a long time...!

Which is to say, I've finally gotten to send out the first new *Baccano!* in almost three years, but...

I'm so sorry, like I said in the afterword of the previous volume when I mentioned "There might be a fifth volume..." this arc will conclude in the next volume, "END & EPILOGUE"!

I'd actually planned to wrap everything up with a really thick volume this time, but it's been three years since I've written *Baccano!*, after all, so I'd forgotten things and my sense for some things had gotten off track, and I decided that it would've felt really half-baked if I'd tried to force it to conclude in this volume, so there will be an "E"... To everyone who was looking forward to watching things wrap up, I'm really very sorry.

And I'm sure there are some people wondering, "Oh, come on, are you going to make us wait another three years?!"... but please don't worry. I talked over my schedule with Dengeki's editorial department, and we set my schedule for the next six months firmly into place.

My schedule with Dengeki Bunko is projected to be as following: A *Standing Ovation with Orihara Izaya* in the fall, volume 4 of *Fate/strange Fake* in the winter, and then after that (at the end of winter or in spring?), *Baccano 1935 END & EPILOGUE*.

I'll have a lot of work from other publishing companies in that time, too, but that's the order we've decided for my Dengeki Bunko work, so I hope you understand...!

By the way, there have been a lot of changes to the original flow of the story in these past three years. There were some plot changes, of course, but for instance I'd also planned for Cookie to go wild every night and hunt mobsters...! but given the recent reports of bear attacks, I refrained. That said, it is extremely dangerous to approach and get friendly with bears like Isaac and Miria did, so please, everyone, be careful of bears in your everyday life!

Still, three years. They say "Planted peach and chestnut seeds take three years to bear fruit and persimmons take eight*," but in the time it takes for a peach tree to grow, a lot of things have happened. I was laid up by an illness called anaphylactoid purpura (I've recovered now), tried my hand at writing a short story per month to accompany the *Durarara!!* DVDs/BluRays for 18 straight months**, started the new *Fate/strange Fake* series, tried my hand at writing the manga *Stealth Symphony*, and for the first time tried my hand at writing the script for a game, *HeavenxInferno*... there was a lot going on. In the future I'd like to add *Baccano!* to the mix and keep writing and keep my brain organized. And if I have a chance to work on *Vamp!* and *Etsusa Bridge*... by all means...!

So, after a long rest, what gave me the energy to write *Baccano!* again—is Mr. Fujimoto Shinta's version of *Baccano!* running in *Young Gangan*!

I never thought that the first volume, which I wrote thirteen years ago, would be picked up by Media Works again...! Mr. Fujimoto knows *Baccano!* even better than I do, and he always puts extra details into the backgrounds of the panels, so I look forward to every new chapter!

Keith's abduction by the Phantom Father, which is touched on briefly in this volume, comes from a manga-original prequel episode, so fans of the main story should by all means get their hands on the *Young Gangan* version of *Baccano!*

* The rest of this is the usual thanks.

Everyone at Dengeki Bunko's editorial department, including my supervising editor Papio-san. The proofreading department, for whom I'm always causing trouble by being late with my work. As well as everyone from every department of Ascii Mediaworks. I'm really, *really* sorry for this time in particular...

To my friends, family, fellow authors, and illustrators who always support me.

And to Enami Katsumi, who has been drawing the characters so appealingly even though it's been three years. His portraits on twitter are a must-see...!

And to all of you who have taken a look at this book.

To everyone above, I give my enormous gratitude—Thank you!

July, 2016 While frolicking in the flowers from the *Undertale* computer game Narita Ryohgo

And look what we have this time! On the opposite page there's a special bonus image! Mr. Fujimoto Shinta drew this after he completed a preview manga that was published in Dengeki Bunko Magazine. Thank you so much!



Text on image:

Congratulations on the publication of BACCANO! 1935-D!

I'm so moved to be able to publish the comic at the same time!

I hope you'll check out *Baccano!* from Young Gangan Comics as well!

Back cover image:



*An idiom meaning “it takes time to see the results of one’s actions”

**Thank you to Liza, Gabi, and an anon on tumblr for explaining what this sentence is referring to! The stories are being translated [here](#).